



MODEL SLUGGER

SPORTS Illustrated

GIANCARLO STANTON

IS NO PAINT-BY-
NUMBERS STAR

By **BEN REITER**

P. 46

NCAA:
THE BRINK OF
MADNESS
**GONZAGA
RISING**

(THANKS, KENTUCKY)

By **PHIL TAYLOR**
P. 28

MIAMI, FEB. 19
The Marlins' main
man is SI's first-ever
body-paint cover subject.
Painted by Joanne Gair
(with help from SI Swimsuit
model Erin Heatherton)

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BREAKING
NEWS

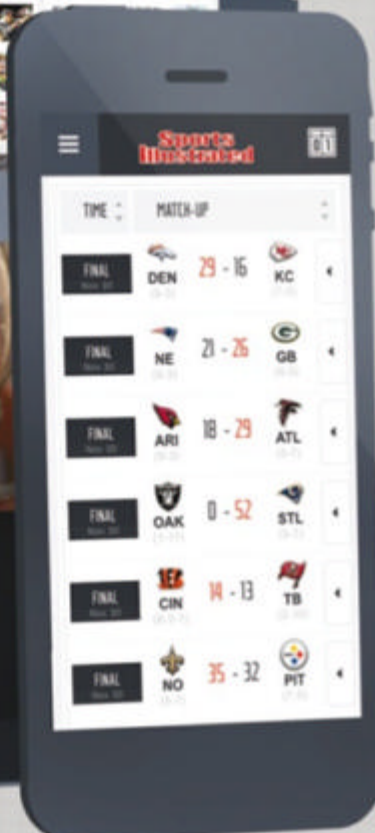
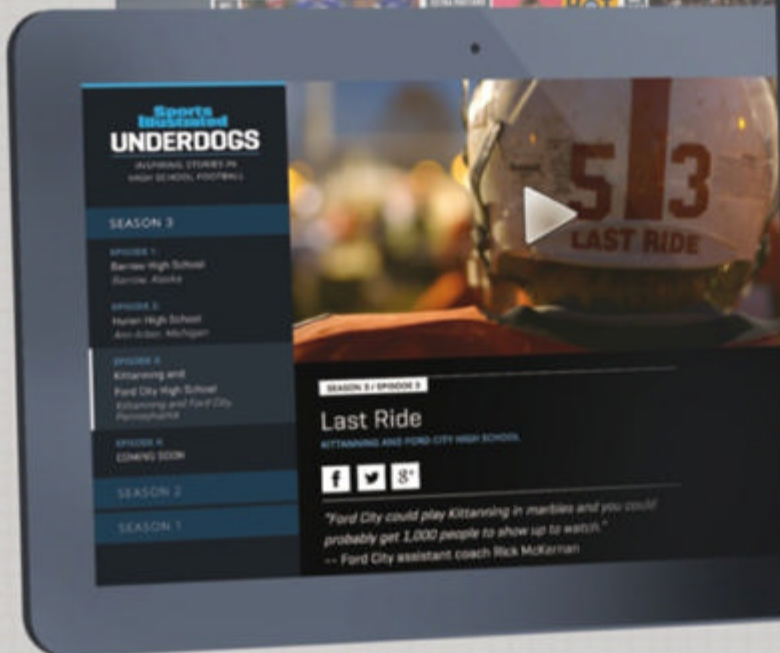
SPORTS NEWS,
VIEWS, VIDEO
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NEWS ILLUSTRATED | VIEWS ILLUSTRATED | SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

PRO FOOTBALL
38

The Combine

What unfolds in Indianapolis—in the weight room, at the podium, and in the lobbies and bars—is the foundation of a new NFL season

LINEUP

3.2.15

2015 | VOLUME 122 | NO. 9

40 YARD DASH

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The move west has been a boon for the Zags' forward

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Joey Logano's win signaled a shake-up among racing's elite

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Nashville's riskiest gamble could mean a long playoff run

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The crazy, joyful, mournful tale of the Vermont Frost Heaves

By Alexander Wolff

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There's no place
like Minnesota

SI HAS REGIONAL COVERS THIS WEEK:

PHOTOGRAPHY BY WALTER IOOSS JR. FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, BODYPAINTING BY JOANNE GAIR FOR JOANNEGAIR.COM USING BODY ART PRODUCTS BY TRENDYTRIBALS.COM (STANTON); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (WILTJER); WALTER IOOSS JR. FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (INSET)



FLYING DUCK

Oregon's Marcus Mariota ran the fastest 40 (4.52) among quarterbacks at the NFL combine.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
AJ MAST FOR
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Sports Illustrated

SI.COM

FOR MARCH 2, 2015



SI
DIGITAL BONUS



MAD DASH

From the SI Vault
Aug. 10, 1998

The 40 has become the most trusted measurement of speed in football, even though it's totally unreliable
By Ivan Maisel

To read this and other stories from the *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* archive, go to SI.com/vault



The Bucs Start Here

Now that the 2015 NFL combine (*page 38*) is complete and the draft is only two months away—it begins on April 30—all eyes are on the Bucs. Who will they take with the No. 1 pick: **Marcus Mariota** or **Jameis Winston**? If speed and agility are paramount, Mariota is the front-runner, posting a 4.52 40 at the combine, the fastest of the 13 quarterbacks who participated. However, it was Winston who was impressive on the throwing end, easily hitting receivers in stride during drills. Who would you take? Go to SI.com/nfl for a complete breakdown of each player's attributes, as well as rankings of the nation's other top prospects, in Don Banks's NFL Mock Draft.

SI.COM'S Top Stories

1 The Unlikely MVP

For a roundup of last week's most popular stories on SI.com, including Lee Jenkins's feature on the Rockets' **James Harden**, go to SI.com/topstories



2 Courtroom Drama

Kurt Busch's accuser says she's paying a heavy price

3 More from Mariota

Is Marcus Mariota more than just a spread-offense QB?

4 Re-ranking the recruits

A new look at the 2012 CFB recruiting class

5 Winter World Cup

Qatar is set for an unseasonal World Cup in 2022



Don't let your sports fantasies end just because football

season is over and spring training is just starting. With Basketball Throwdown on the FanNation fantasy sports app, you can challenge your friends for cash prizes or just bragging rights. Go to fannation.si.com to pick three NBA players from three teams and see who beats his projection.



Go to the Video

Looking for another way to stay in the game? Check out 120 Sports, the all-digital network that provides 24-hour access to highlights and analysis. In conjunction with *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*, MLB.com, the NBA, the NHL, NASCAR and Campus Insiders, 120 Sports features live and on-demand videos driven by topics trending on social media. To see more, go to 120sports.com



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Modern Essentials
selected by
DAVID BECKHAM

A man with a beard and tattoos is wearing a black coat. He is standing in a modern, industrial-style setting with large windows and concrete pillars. He has his hand near his face, looking thoughtfully to the side. The coat is long and has a high collar.

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+

1
of
3**Leading
Off**

Four Closure

■ To honor legendary North Carolina coach Dean Smith, who died on Feb. 7, the Tar Heels employed one of his strategic innovations—the Four Corners offense—under the command of point guard Marcus Paige (5), in an 89-60 win over Georgia Tech last Saturday in Chapel Hill. Born during a practice in 1962, the scheme allowed Smith to spread his players and to control the tempo. Protests over the delaying tactic led to the NCAA's implementation of the shot clock in '85.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
SPENCER HERLONG





+

2
3**Leading
Off**

Shrinky Rink

■ In this tilt-shift photo, the action on the ice between the Kings and the Sharks at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara is in focus while the surrounding setting is not. The technique allows a photographer to simulate a miniature scene. The game was big for L.A., though, which beat its rival 2-1 in the first outdoor game in San Jose team history.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROBERT BECK
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED





+

33

**Leading
Off**

Top of The Line

■ In this view from the Goodyear blimp, Martin Truex Jr. (78) leads Joey Logano (22), who's running second, and a pack of racers past the start/finish line at Daytona International Speedway on Sunday. With 13 laps to go, Logano took the lead and held on to win his first Daytona 500 (page 34).

PHOTOGRAPH BY
BEN VAN HOOK
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



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COVER

The Patriots are on to immortality? The hyperbole here is way over the top, considering that the losing coach made arguably the dumbest play call in Super Bowl history, while the winning coach will forever be remembered as a serial cheater.

Rick Moore
Mooreville, Ind.

In my book, the quarterback who is on his way to immortality is still the one with five NFL MVP awards: Peyton Manning. If you want to go by championships, the most dominant pro QB ever was Otto Graham, who won four AAFC and three NFL titles between 1946 and '55.

Michael Skebe
Arvada, Colo.



POINT AFTER

While Lee Jenkins offered several reasons why hockey players could be enticed to play at Arizona State, I was sad to see he left out one: education.

Tim Bartlett, Vadnais Heights, Minn.

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CONTACT
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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INBOX

FOR FEB. 9-16, 2015

I don't know who disgusts me more: Patrick Reed and his wife, Justine, for allegedly demanding that his family be ejected from the grounds at Pinehurst during the 2014 U.S. Open, or the USGA official who saw fit to honor such a spiteful request.

Jeff Renk, Greenville, S.C.



If Russell Wilson had completed the pass to Ricardo Lockette on second-and-goal for a touchdown, everyone would be boasting about how Pete Carroll is a genius. Seattle tried a play and it failed. It's what makes football interesting, no matter which team you're rooting for.

Benjamin Fox, Wyckoff, N.J.

The way the Super Bowl ended reminded me of something Ohio State coach Woody Hayes used to say: "Three things can happen when you throw the football, and two of them are bad."

Dan Shenk, Goshen, Ind.

The photo of Richard Sherman soliciting a handshake from Tom Brady after the Seahawks' heartbreaking defeat in Super Bowl XLIX is evidence that good sportsmanship is alive and well.

Jack W. Waller, Fort Worth



► **Correction** Due to a production error, SI ran the incorrect version of a Monster.com ad in a special Super Bowl commemorative issue earlier this month. SI regrets the error.

SCORECARD



Trade



Path of Impact



Secondary Impact



SACRAMENTO

+ **Andre Miller** *G*

The Kings are on their third coach in three months; they'll take any leadership they can find.



LOS ANGELES

Doc Rivers loses out on the big man—and locker room voice—he needed to fortify the Clippers' bench and title hopes.



LOS ANGELES

The Lakers and Dragic wanted each other, but L.A. wouldn't give up a first-round pick. Now Miami can offer the most in free agency.



PORTLAND

+ **Arron Afflalo** *G*,
Alonzo Gee *F*

In Afflalo (*left*) the Blazers get the top-end sixth man they need to contend.



UTAH

+ **Grant Jerrett** *F*,
+ Rights to **C Tibor Pleiss**
+ One 1st-rounder, one 2nd-rounder

Utah was never jazzed by Kanter, who wanted out. The team did well to get a first-rounder for him.



MINNESOTA

+ **Kevin Garnett** *F*

KG (*above*) gets a chance to groom Andrew Wiggins for the team that gave him his start.



DENVER

+ **Will Barton** *G*,
+ Rights to **G Cenk Akyol**

Teardown in progress. Vets are out, and no one is safe.



PHOENIX

+ **Marcus Thornton** *G*,
Brandon Knight *G*,
Danny Granger *F*
+ Three 1st-rounders

Dragic (*right*) wasn't going to re-sign, and once Knight became available Thomas was expendable. Is Knight better than Dragic? He's five years younger.



DALLAS

With Prince unable to orchestrate a buyout in Boston or Detroit, Dallas loses a shot at a veteran, which could have bolstered its suspect bench.



SAN ANTONIO

A former teammate of Manu Ginóbili's on the Argentine national team, Prigioni (*right*) would have been a floor general on the Spurs' bench.

Double Deals

A busy NBA trade deadline has impacts beyond the teams making swaps

BY MATT DOLLINGER

THERE WERE 11 trades involving 43 players and 14 draft picks in the final 24 hours before the NBA trade deadline, a dizzying array of deals as teams sought to solidify themselves for the playoffs, unload pending free agents, stockpile future assets or dump locker room malcontents. The ripple effects of all those moves on rival teams that have overlapping needs are nearly impossible to track—unless there's a handy map that lays out who went where and what it means around the league.



MILWAUKEE

+ **Michael Carter-Williams** *G*,
Tyler Ennis *G*, **Miles Plumlee** *F*

The Bucks rebuilt the backcourt and replaced Larry Sanders, who they were done with anyway.



TORONTO

The Raptors needed big-man depth for playoffs and could have used McGee's actual basketball skills.



BOSTON

+ **Jonas Jerebko** *F*,
Luigi Datome *F*,
Isaiah Thomas *G*

Thomas is a perfect complement to their backcourt, while moving Prince lets them try out younger options.



PHILADELPHIA

+ **JaVale McGee** *C*, **Isaiah Canaan** *G*
+ Rights to *C* **Chukwudiebere Maduabum**
+ Two 1st-rounders, One 2nd-rounder

McGee (*above*) helps with the salary floor as the picks pile up, but they hit reset again by dumping MCW and McDaniels.



INDIANA

The Pacers, fifth-worst on offense, could make an off-season run at the sweet-shooting Wesley Matthews, who overlaps with Afflalo.



OKLAHOMA CITY

+ **Enes Kanter** *C*, **Steve Novak** *F*,
D.J. Augustin *G*, **Kyle Singler** *F*

The Thunder remade their bench and look to have the depth and talent for a playoff run—assuming Kevin Durant's foot heals.



DETROIT

+ **Tayshaun Prince** *F*,
Reggie Jackson *G*

Jackson could boost the Pistons into the playoffs.



WASHINGTON

+ **Ramon Sessions** *G*

They needed, and got, a younger guard who could keep up.



BROOKLYN

+ **Thaddeus Young** *F*

They got younger, but expect them to remain good, not great.



NEW YORK

+ **Alexey Shved** *G*
+ Two 2nd-rounders

Draft picks are better than 37-year-old point guards when attempting to tank.



NEW ORLEANS

+ **Norris Cole** *G*, **Justin Hamilton** *C*,
Ish Smith *G*
+ Rights to *F* **Latavious Williams**

With point guard Jrue Holiday injured, the Pelicans needed more than Cole as they battle OKC for a playoff spot.



ORLANDO

Both the C's and Magic have speedy, defensive-minded backcourts with potential star power. Only one of them has the scoring sixth man—Thomas (*left*)—to round out the rotation.



HOUSTON

+ **Pablo Prigioni** *G*,
K.J. McDaniels *G*

The Rockets added savvy and spring without giving up much.



MIAMI

+ **Goran Dragic** *G*
Zoran Dragic *G*

The Heat paid dearly for their best point guard since Tim Hardaway. Can they keep him?

THE
NEXT
KELLY

Eleven-time ASP world champ Kelly Slater is going strong at 43, but as the 2015 surfing season kicks off on Saturday with the Quiksilver Pro Gold Coast event in Queensland, Australia, it's time to think about who will be the next face of the sport. Here's how the two most likely candidates stack up.

—Megan Hart

BOARD
SHORTS

JOHN JOHN FLORENCE

22/ Oahu, Hawaii

JJF

Third overall in '14; won the Quiksilver Pro

Tops in *Surfer* magazine's '14 poll, ending Slater's 10-year run

Barrels; first surfed Pipeline when he was five

"The pinnacle of surfing for me is to have a heat against this guy in big barrels."

Implied textual repartee with Taylor Swift

AGE/HOMETOWN

NICKNAME

TOUR SUCCESS

POPULARITY

SIGNATURE STRENGTH

KELLY SAYS

CONTROVERSY

GABRIEL MEDINA

21/ Maresius, Brazil

The Freak Kid

World champ in '14; he and Slater only under-21 winners

One of Brazil's biggest TV networks, GLOBO, started covering surfing last August

Aerials; pulled off arguably the best backflip ever

"He's passed every test. He doesn't really have a weakness."

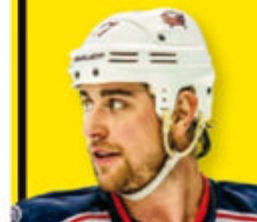
Stormed off after finishing second at the '12 Rip Curl Pro

THEY
SAID IT

"I guess I make them mad."

Brandon Dubinsky

Blue Jackets center after his scrap last Thursday with Sidney Crosby made him the only player in the NHL to fight both the Penguins' star and the Capitals' Alexander Ovechkin.



Pay Pals

Why Floyd-Manny happened

After six years, a handful of failed attempts and endless rhetoric, Floyd Mayweather, 37, and Manny Pacquiao, 36, boxing's two biggest stars, have reached an agreement to square off. The date: May 2. The site: The MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas. The stakes: officially, three pieces of the 147-pound title; unofficially, bragging rights as the best fighter of this generation.

What ended the impasse? The pool of

marketable opponents is evaporating. In seven bouts from 2008 to '11, Pacquiao averaged 1.1 million pay-per-view buys; in his five since, he eclipsed 1 million once. Mayweather has more buys (14.2 million) than any fighter, but three of his last four fights have failed to break a million. Mayweather-Pacquiao is expected to surpass the single-fight record for buys (2.4 million) and revenue (\$150 million) and double Nevada's live-gate mark (\$20.7 million). "The interest will be incredible," says Arum. "It's five or six years of Super Bowls all wrapped into one fight."

—Chris Mannix

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The Butler Did It

The strange days of a Super Bowl hero

AFTER FINISHING HIS college career at Division II West Alabama, Malcolm Butler was earning \$7.25 an hour as a fryer at a Popeyes in his hometown of Vicksburg, Miss., when he was signed by the Patriots last May. When he made his game-sealing, goal line interception in the final seconds of Super Bowl XLIX, his ascent to New England folk hero and Grammy presenter went from improbable to surreal. Here are seven ways the 24-year-old's life has changed:

LL Cool J knows him.

"He introduced himself at the Grammys. I was like, You know who I am? And then Nicki Minaj wanted to pose for a picture."

Jamie Foxx gave up his number. "I haven't hit him up yet. I don't know when, or if, I will."

He got a parade.

"When they asked me, I thought it was crazy. But people in Vicksburg are all so excited, I couldn't say no."

He got a stylist.

"It was for the Grammys. She wanted me to wear sneakers. I know that's the style, but I wanted to wear dress shoes."

He sat front row at a Celtics game. "On TV the games always looked real big, but when you're up close, it looks like any old high school game, you know?"

His Popeyes became famous. "Reporters are calling up my old managers, people pose in front of the sign and put photos on social media. They even had a 21-piece special, in honor of my jersey number."

Tom Brady gave him a car. "I posed with a red one but asked for a black one," Butler says of the 2015 Chevy pickup Brady won as Super Bowl MVP. "I'm waiting for it to get shipped."



BREAKOUT PERFORMER

HOT

Amar'e Stoudemire

Mavs debut on Sunday: 14 points and 3 boards in 11 minutes backing up Tyson Chandler (12 and 7). Would anyone trade those two for Carmelo?

The Kings

The Stanley Cup champs won seven straight. Did the playoffs start early?

Nebraska

After a 74-46 loss to Iowa, coach Tim Miles barred the players from the locker room, guaranteeing they'll continue to stink.

Syracuse

In a ceremony to honor forward Roosevelt Bouie (1976-80), the school misspelled his name.

Kevin Durant

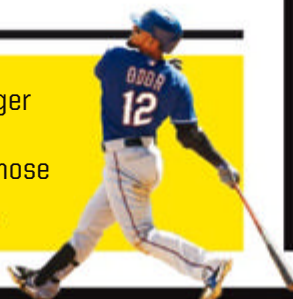
He's out after having the surgical hardware in his right foot adjusted. His health, like the Thunder's season, is screwy.

NOT



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

The Rangers signed the younger brother of second baseman Rougned Odor, a shortstop whose **name is also Rougned Odor.**



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[^]1Symphony Health Solutions ProVoice™ Survey, Jan. 2005–Mar. 2014 ^{^^}Pharmacy Times Surveys, Acid Reducer/Heartburn Categories 2006–2014

**P&G Calculation based on Nielsen ScanTrack FD+, 2004–2014

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A young girl with blonde hair in a ponytail is seen from behind, jumping rope on a paved sidewalk. She is wearing a grey t-shirt with "PLAY 60" and an NFL logo on the back, white shorts, and colorful sneakers. The background shows a brick building and green trees.

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SCORECARD



Jaylen Brown | *Marietta, Ga.* | *Basketball*

Jaylen, a 6' 7" senior forward at Wheeler High, had 32 points and 17 rebounds in an 87-68 victory over Douglas County High in the Class 6A state tournament round of 16. A member of the U.S.'s gold-medal FIBA Americas 18-and-under team, Jaylen was named MVP of the City of Palms tournament in December.



Catherine Pagano | *Upper Saddle River, N.J.* | *Indoor Track*

Catherine, a senior at North Highlands High, ran the New Balance girls' mile at New York City's NYRR Millrose Games in 4:50.66 to win by .36 of a second. A week later she took home the 800-meter title at the New Jersey Meet of Champions in 2:11.89. Catherine will run at Stanford.



James Burke | *Port Jefferson, N.Y.* | *Indoor Track*

James, a senior at Port Jefferson High, won the New Balance boys' mile at the 108th Millrose Games by .44 with a time of 4:11.25. Two weeks earlier he was first in the 1,000 meters at the Armory Invitational in 2:26.75, then the best time in the nation this season. [It ranked third at week's end.]

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited By ALEXANDRA FENWICK



Chanelle Molina | *Kailua-Kona, Hawaii* | *Basketball*

Chanelle, a 5' 6" junior guard at Konawaena High, had 27 points to lead the Wildcats past Lahainaluna High 51-41 for the Division 1 title. She was named the state tournament's most outstanding player. Hawaii's reigning Gatorade player of the year, she averaged 15.0 points, 7.5 rebounds and 7.0 assists.



Travis Boyd | *Hopkins, Minn.* | *Hockey*

Boyd, a senior forward at Minnesota, led the Gophers to a sweep of Ohio State, scoring the game-winner in a 4-2 victory and then a hat trick in a 6-2 win. Despite missing seven games with a broken right foot, he led the team with 15 goals through Sunday and had the NCAA's top shooting percentage [.288].



Lydia Frey and Let Them Eat Cake
Hume, Va. | *Dog Show*

Lydia, a junior at Mizzou K-12 Online, and her one-year-old Bedlington terrier (aka Tony) took the Westminster Kennel Club's Junior Showmanship title. Lydia earned a \$6,000 scholarship.

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For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow [@SI_Faces](https://twitter.com/SI_Faces) on Twitter.



Just My Type

→ Interview by **DAN PATRICK**

DAN PATRICK: Did you realize you had 27 points in the first half of the All-Star Game?

RUSSELL WESTBROOK: It happened so quickly. I was getting layups. Made a few lucky threes here and there.

DP: You wound up with 41 and banged your head on the backboard.

RW: Sometimes I jump a little higher.

DP: Have you ever hit your head on the rim?

RW: No, I haven't jumped that high.

DP: You were drafted by Seattle. Did you get a SuperSonics jersey?

RW: The day of the draft I flew to Seattle. I took a picture with a SuperSonics jersey. Then two days later I was in Oklahoma City.

DP: You and Kevin Durant need to pose in your Sonics jerseys.

RW: [Laughs.] I don't even know where it is.

DP: What do you think of the new Kevin Durant? He's got some opinions now.

RW: Kevin is his own man. He's super, super positive and a very unselfish guy. He's just going on how he feels right now.

DP: Do you think the media went out of their way to look for tension between you and Durant?

RW: I'm not sure. But Kevin and I always became closer and closer no matter what



RUSSELL WESTBROOK

SMOOTH OPERATOR

Don't let the peach fuzz fool you. As he showed (again) in the All-Star Game, the 6' 3" Thunder guard can stand out among—and soar above—the NBA's best.

was made up about us. Like brothers. [We] got through everything that was thrown our way.

DP: Does part of you want to leave OKC like James Harden did? To lead your own team?

RW: Not at all. Kevin's one of the best players in the world. Over the past four or five years only [the Spurs] have won more games than us. I don't think it gets too much better than that. You can be on your own and win a few games and then go home in the summer. I'd rather have a chance to win the championship every year.

DP: Where is your All-Star Game MVP award?

RW: In my house.

DP: If I walk into your house, how long until I find it?

RW: First, I don't know if you're going to walk into my house.

DP: Let's say you're there and you escort me in.

RW: Oh, it may take you a minute. I put it upstairs in the trophy room.

DP: What does Durant have in his man cave that you don't?

RW: I don't know if Kevin wants me to tell you.

DP: You got his back. That's a good teammate.

RW: Always.

DP: Can you grow a beard like James Harden?

RW: No way. I've been growing out my facial hair for 26 years. This is what I got.

DP: That's it?

RW: Never had to shave one day in my life. □

Guest Shots Say What?



Yankees broadcaster **Michael Kay** told me

that Alex Rodriguez was doomed in New York. "Alex's worst crime was the guy to his left," Kay said. "If he had won five World Series, Derek [Jeter] would have won nine. . . . The worst thing that happened to Rodriguez was that the trade to the Red Sox [in 2003] didn't go through." . . .

George Karl, who took



over the Kings on Feb. 17, explained

why he got fired by the Nuggets in 2013 despite being named Coach of the Year: "The posse is always forming against you. Being in one city for nine years, the posse got bigger and bigger. And they felt excellence in the



regular season wasn't good enough." . . .

Denny Hamlin

admitted he dislikes almost as many NASCAR drivers as he likes, starting with rival Brad Keselowski. I asked Hamlin if anyone likes Keselowski. "His parents," he said. "Probably."



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The Case for . . . The Seller's Market

BY SAM PAGE

WHEN THE STARS traded defenseman Stephane Robidas (*right*) to the Ducks for a fourth-round draft pick before the 2014 trade deadline, Dallas GM Jim Nill provided a familiar explanation for the swap. "The move was designed to give Stephane a chance to get on a good team," Nill told *The Dallas Morning News*, "and this was the best option."

Teams out of contention often defer to a veteran's wishes. Robidas was a 37-year-old pending free agent who'd been injured for most of the season, but at the time of the trade the Stars were in eighth in the West and, stranger still, likely to face Anaheim in the first round. When that matchup did in fact materialize, Robidas played big minutes in the Ducks' Game 1 and 2 wins before fracturing his leg in Game 3. Anaheim held on to win the series in six but lost to the Kings in the next round.

Even more surprising than the trade was Nill's explanation: The Stars may have been a playoff team, but they were not "good." In a league in which an eighth seed had won it all as recently as 2012, this attitude amounted to heresy.

But Nill was right—bubble playoff teams *should* sell. More than any economic force, delusion drives the NHL trade deadline. Sixteen teams make the playoffs

and half a dozen more are in the race up to their final games. The ones that really are "one player away" find themselves in bidding wars with teams that are several players and even more years from true contention. That the pseudocontenders are often worse talent evaluators (some coincidence, that) only compounds the situation.

To observe this phenomenon, simply compare a player's value at the deadline with his value after the season. Last year the Avalanche traded a second-round pick to the Flames for goalie Reto Berra, to serve as a backup to their backup. Colorado lost in the first round (Berra, of course, didn't play), and when Berra hit the open market, the NHL shrugged. The

guy who had seemed worthy of a second-rounder four months earlier re-signed with Colorado for a paltry \$1.5 million.

In 2013 the Penguins traded two second-round picks to the Sharks for then 33-year-old defenseman Douglas Murray. After the Bruins swept Pittsburgh in the Eastern Conference finals, Murray signed a \$1.5 million deal with the Canadiens, his last NHL gig before tumbling to the German league this season.

In each case the GM thought he was bringing in a player who would help his team lift the Cup; in reality he was trading a bit of the future for a guy who was redundant at best. There are exceptions of course—last year the Kings, the No. 6 seed in the West, put themselves over the top with the deadline acquisition of right wing Marian Gaborik from the Blue Jackets—but teams that fail to grab a star like Gaborik often settle for much less while giving up too much. For the most part only the top six or eight contenders should consider buying.

That's especially true this year. In a draft that features two superstar talents at the top—the Erie Otters' Connor McDavid and Boston University's Jack Eichel—and depth throughout, borderline playoff teams should be jumping at the chance both to improve their draft position and to stockpile second-round choices.

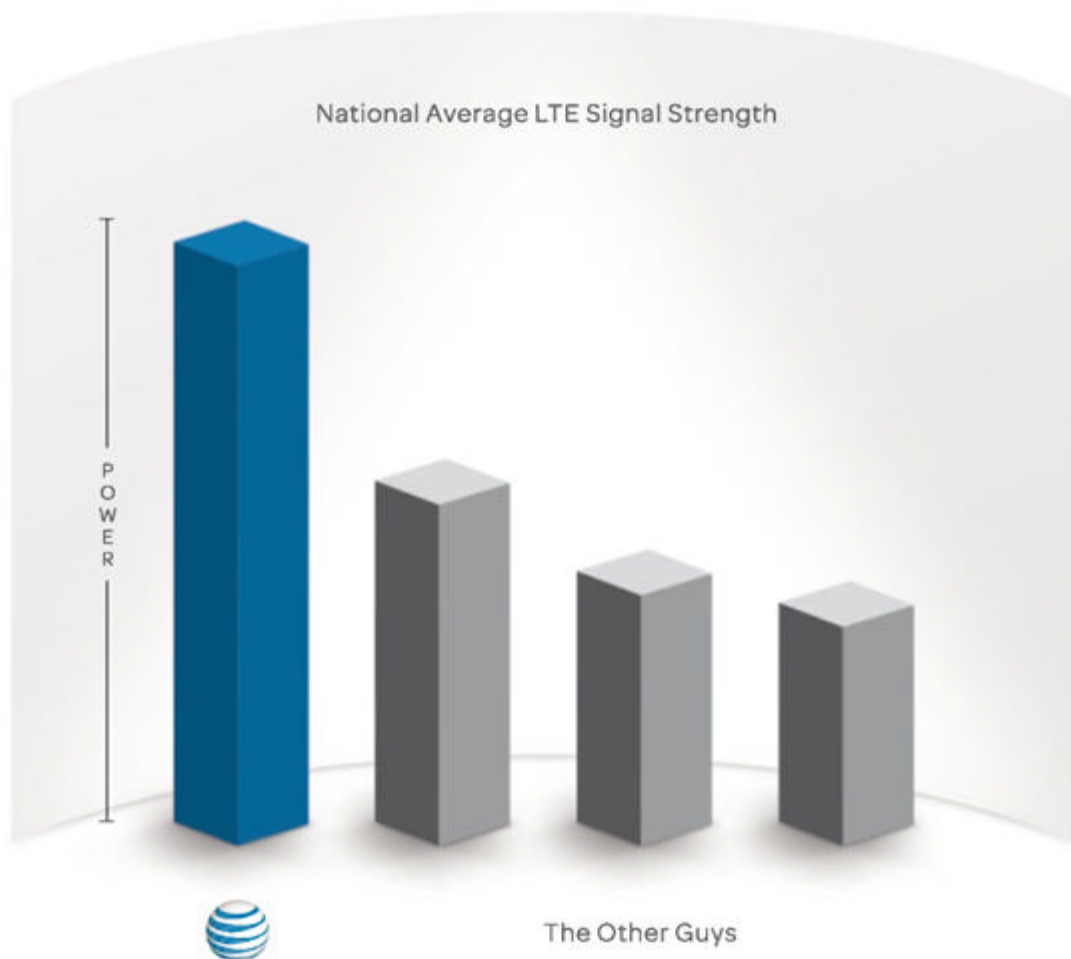
So before any GM sends a second-round selection to the Maple Leafs for center Daniel Winnick—looking at you, Flames and Panthers—he should instead consider shipping out his own impending free agents. Those fringe players will be available after the season, when no one wants them again. □



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Words with . . .

Tim Howard

The U.S. and Everton keeper, who starred in the 2014 World Cup, opens up about the President, publishing and the price of greatness

BY GRANT WAHL



Tim Howard was a fixture on the national soccer team long before last year's round of 16 in Brazil, but then the goalkeeper set the World Cup single-game saves record of 15 against Belgium and vaulted to a new level of recognition—social media memes, magazine covers, even a deal for his own memoir. That book, *The Keeper: A Life of Saving Goals and Achieving Them*, tells the story of a New Jersey kid who jumped from MLS to mighty Manchester United and, eventually, into the folklore of U.S. soccer. *SI* caught up with Howard for a World Cup postscript.

So many people in the U.S.—beyond just soccer fans—saw the Belgium game. How has that game changed your life?

Tim Howard: I was 35 in Brazil; I was in a good place, physically and mentally. How have things changed? They really haven't. I've always felt like I've been grounded. I don't miss days of work. I don't take those things for granted. [Before the game] soccer fans knew us inside and out, but mainstream America, non-soccer fans, stepped up and took notice. That's what I'm most proud of. Tony [Meola], Tab [Ramos], John [Harkes], Alexi [Lalas]—those guys brought soccer to the forefront, made people take notice. My generation will be the one, I hope, that got stockbrokers and businesspeople to take longer lunches and watch the games.

What's your favorite part from your talk with President Obama after that game?

TH: He told me to shave my beard. He said I'd be less recognizable that way. I didn't heed his advice, unfortunately. Lesson No. 1: Always listen to the President.

Seven weeks later you announced you were taking a yearlong break from the national team. Why?

TH: It was 100% family-oriented. With my grueling [club schedule], I don't get to see my two kids as often as I'd like. The one window of opportunity is during international breaks. I realized this would be a good chance for me during the season and in the summer to get a long extended time with my kids. That was the sole reason. I felt hungrier and more motivated



than ever from that World Cup experience, and I would love nothing more than to get back out there. But I have to make decisions as a parent and as a person. I had good conversations with [U.S. coach] Jurgen [Klinsmann] in that decision-making process.

Do you plan to make yourself available to the national team this fall, when World Cup 2018 qualifying starts?

TH: Oh, yeah. I'll be available for selection, as long as Jurgen decides he wants me. I know how grueling World Cup qualifying is and how exciting it can be. The thought of another run in '18 makes me salivate.

Everton was so good last season that expectations were really high heading into 2014-15. This year hasn't been easy. [Everton was 12th in the Premier League as of Feb. 23.] What's the team experiencing?

TH: Last year [after a coaching changeover] we clicked right away. This year teams have had time to prepare for us. We're not a new entity anymore. They've tried different ways to defend us. The reality is: This is the best team in terms of depth and quality that I've played on [in nine seasons] at Everton. We're focusing on being tougher, more in your face, making sure our team's in the fight. The rest will come. It's a long, grueling season, and really, you're only judged at the end. It doesn't matter what gets said in between.

One thing I learned from your book is that when Manchester United recruited you from the New Jersey MetroStars, in 2003, MLS did not initially accept its offer. You had to dip into your own pocket to cover the difference, which is stunning to me.

TH: It was stunning to me too. [Laughs.] But I was going to move heaven and earth to make that happen. If I had to skimp on the front end and lose out on some cash, I was confident enough in my own abilities to make it up on the back end tenfold. That was my thought process: I need to get to England, and if all goes well, I won't be missing the money I had to contribute on the front end. Nothing was going to stand in my way. It seems crazy, but what was I going to do—stick around here for a while?

You also write that your pursuit of greatness made staying married difficult. [Howard divorced in 2012 after a nine-year marriage.] Is that more common among top-level athletes than most people realize?

TH: I think so. The divorce rate among athletes is staggering. You see that, and you have to figure out why. There's a lot of pressure to be the best. It becomes like a drug, and some people can manage that. Others find it difficult. I found it difficult. Doing the things I wanted to do came at a

heavy cost. But you have to make decisions in life and work through them.

For a first-time author, what was the process like?

TH: Different than I imagined. A lot more goes into a book than just telling your story. That's part of it, but getting all the fine details? It's amazing how you really have to wrack your brain to remember the ins and outs of life. It was fun. But it wasn't therapeutic in any way. I didn't need any therapy.

Meanwhile, you're doing Premier League commentary for NBC.



"I'll be available. The thought of another run in '18 makes me salivate."

It's pretty rare for active players to do that on their own league. How has that worked out for you so far?

TH: When I had my initial talks with NBC, that was the big discussion: I was never going to slaughter a player on TV, because I know what goes into making plays or not making plays, and there's a way to get that point across without chastising a player. Soccer is a game of turnovers, of mistakes and capitalizing on those mistakes. I have to walk a line. I feel like I've found a good balance; hopefully I don't ever screw that up.

We've gotten so familiar with you over the years that it's easy to forget you have Tourette's syndrome. What sort of work have you been doing with that disorder?

TH: I don't forget I have it when I wake up every day. [Laughs.] It's a continual process; it never stops. Creating awareness is the easiest job in the world because I'm in people's faces—I'm on television, and it's not something I can hide. One of the things we've done is create an advocacy awareness academy at Rutgers. We've brought in coaches and leaders to help young people live their everyday lives and advocate for themselves. These kids have to go to school and play sports and live in a community where people don't always understand what TS is. We try to give them tools to help in that process. □



Zigging For the Zags

FORWARD KYLE WILTJER TOOK AN UNUSUAL TURN WHEN HE LEFT KENTUCKY FOR SPOKANE, BUT THE MOVE WEST HAS BEEN A BOON TO HIS GAME. NOW, CAN HE BOOST GONZAGA'S FORTUNES IN MARCH?

BY PHIL TAYLOR



FULL STRETCH

Wiltjer's rapid ascent after a redshirt season has caught the attention of NBA scouts, who see him as a power forward who can spread the floor.

Photographs by
John W. McDonough
Sports Illustrated

KYLE WILTJER



AFTER A practice in mid-February, Kyle Wiltjer, Gonzaga's lanky junior power forward and undisputed trick-shot king, picked up a basketball that was lying out-of-bounds, a few feet beyond the baseline. Wiltjer has a knack for making ridiculous, one-in-a-million shots, his favorite being a behind-the-back half-court fling that went viral on YouTube in October. At least that was his favorite until he grabbed the ball near the baseline and tossed it, with the ease of a dad playing catch with his Little Leaguer, toward the opposite basket, 90 feet away. *Swish.* The few teammates who were around to see it went berserk. "Usually it takes me a bunch of tries before I make shots like that," says the 6' 10" Wiltjer, who posted video of the shot on his Twitter account. "But that one was on the first try. Crazy."

Wiltjer's college career has been a trick shot of sorts. Picture a long heave across the country from his home in Beaverton, Ore., that banks off Kentucky's Rupp Arena, where he played for two seasons and helped the Wildcats win a national championship in 2012, and ricochets back to Spokane, where it hits nothing but net. After a redshirt season spent mostly building strength, Wiltjer has blossomed into his team's leading scorer (17.4 points per game through Sunday) and one of the most versatile offensive threats in the country. Once little more than a lead-footed long-range shooter, he has become equally dangerous from perimeter to post for the Zags, who are 28-1 and ranked third in the nation. Wiltjer scored 45 points—the third most in school history—in an 86-74 win over Pacific last Thursday; two days later he chipped in 16 points and 12 rebounds in a 70-60 defeat of Saint Mary's to clinch Gonzaga's third straight West Coast Conference title.

Though the Zags will be back in the NCAA tournament for the 17th consecutive March—with five Sweet 16 appearances under coach Mark Few—they have never reached the Final Four, a fact they are reminded of with increasing frequency at this time of year. "It's a very valid point," says Few, now in this 16th season. "But it's like saying Cindy Crawford has a mole. Well, yes, she does, but is that really the part you want to focus on? We've won a lot of games, we've graduated a lot of players, we've done it with guys who don't get into trouble. Sure, we want to go farther, but we sleep pretty well at night around here."

This year's version of Gonzaga is well-equipped to reach Indianapolis, with a deep squad that includes a pair of senior marksmen in the back-

CHESHIRE CAT

Wiltjer (far right) was one of the many superfreshmen at Kentucky, where he basked in the glow of the 2012 NCAA title (below, far left).



"Kyle was all finesse," says Gonzaga's strength and conditioning coach. "He wanted to avoid contact because he didn't have the body for it. Watching him run was almost painful."



court, Kevin Pangos (46.0% on threes) and Gary Bell Jr. (38.7%); 7' 1", 288-pound man-mountain center Przemek Karnowski (10.4 points); and 6' 10" freshman forward Domantas Sabonis (the son of former Trail Blazers center Arvydas Sabonis), who is shooting 67.5% from the field and leading Gonzaga in rebounding (6.9). "They are a complete team," says Arizona coach Sean Miller, whose Wildcats handed the Zags their only loss, 66-63 in overtime, on Dec. 6. "They share the ball so well, and they will test you defensively from every angle."

No one has had a bigger impact on Gonzaga's attack than Wiltjer, a McDonald's All-American at Jesuit High in Beaverton who originally chose to play for Kentucky's John Calipari over other suitors from Gonzaga, Kansas and Wake Forest. "I recruited him for three years, and Calipari made one call," Few jokes. The Wildcats' 2011-12 freshman class included Anthony Davis, Michael Kidd-Gilchrist, Marquis Teague and Wiltjer, who averaged 5.0 points during their national championship season. As a sophomore Wiltjer was the Cats' designated shooter off the bench;



his 10.2 points per game and 36.7% accuracy from deep earned him the SEC's Sixth Man of the Year award, yet he began to consider transferring.

Wiltjer wasn't unhappy in Lexington, but he also wasn't satisfied with his development as a player. Even if he had stayed there, he might have requested a redshirt year to develop his game and his 215-pound frame. With another shipment of one-and-done freshmen, including Julius Randle and Dakari Johnson, about to arrive on Calipari's perpetual conveyor belt of future pros, Wiltjer also faced the prospect of his role being diminished. "I felt that I needed to improve my strength and explosiveness," he says. "And I knew about Kelly Olynyk doing exactly that at Gonzaga." By redshirting, Olynyk had transformed himself from a little-known backup center to an All-America and first-round NBA draft pick in 2013.

It also helped that Wiltjer became close friends with Pangos, who is from Holland Landing, Ont., when they played together on the Canadian national team during the summer of 2013. (Wiltjer's 6' 11" father, Greg, who played one season for Oregon State, is Canadian.) "When he told me he was thinking of transferring, I just told him how much I loved it at Gonzaga and how great it would be if we were teammates," Pangos says.

Calipari and Few, who are good friends, couldn't do anything except wait for Wiltjer to make up his mind, which was particularly maddening when he went to China with the Canadian team, and it was nearly impossible to reach him. "While he was there, Cal and I were at a Nike event in Washington, D.C.," Few says. "Cal is saying to me, 'Have you heard anything from him?' and I'm saying, 'No, have you?'" While the two coaches were sitting next to each other, Calipari received a text from Wiltjer telling him that he had decided to transfer to Gonzaga. Calipari turned to Few, held up his phone and said, "Congratulations."

WILTJER ARRIVED at Gonzaga as a skinny player content to station himself around the three-point arc. "Kyle was all finesse," says strength and conditioning coach Travis Knight. "He wanted to avoid contact because he didn't have the body for it. He came in with knee pain and tight hips that he was compensating for without even realizing it. Watching him run was almost painful. You would have thought he was a 40-year-old man."

So Knight began to rebuild Wiltjer from the ground up. They began with yoga and other stretching exercises to improve his flexibility and balance. Wiltjer did underwater squats and ran in sand to strengthen his legs and to make him a more explosive jumper. Knight fired 20-pound medicine balls at Wiltjer, who would have to let each ball hit him in the chest or abs, knocking him off balance, and then steady himself quickly enough to grab the ball before it fell to the ground. Knight put on a 120-pound vest to bring his weight to 300, and he forced Wiltjer to box him out. The coach, who is 5' 8", even brought out a mat and wrestled with Wiltjer to improve his ability to get low and gain leverage when battling for position around the basket. "In the beginning it was working on all my weaknesses, which isn't the most fun," Wiltjer says. "But after a while I could feel the difference in my body in practice. I felt stronger and more balanced."

Despite bulking up to 240 pounds, Wiltjer still isn't the chiseled product that the 7-foot, 238-pound Olynyk became. But he's less concerned with the size of his biceps than the efficiency of his game. In scrimmages toward the end of his redshirt year, Wiltjer began getting the ball in the low post and converting shots even through contact. He pulled down rebounds that at one time he wouldn't even have pursued. "He grabbed one with one hand in traffic really aggressively, bringing it into his other hand with a real loud slap," Pangos says. "I was like, O.K., well, *that's* new." All the off-court conditioning clearly changed Wiltjer's mind as much as his body. "I think that ability was always there," Few says, "but he just didn't see himself that way before."

In the process Wiltjer has also changed how he's seen by NBA scouts. He now projects as the kind of stretch four—a power forward with the shooting range to extend defenses—that has become popular in the league. It's not hard to envision him filling that role in the manner of Ryan Anderson, the Pelicans' 6' 10" forward whose name is the first one Wiltjer mentions when asked about pros he admires.

KYLE WILTJER

A FEW GOOD MAN

Since joining forces with Few (below), Wiltjer has remade his body and retooled his game, becoming a force inside as well as outside.



Wiltjer is shooting more accurately than ever, hitting 46.9% of his threes, but he's no longer relying so heavily on that shot. In his last season at Kentucky, 54.0% of his attempts were treys. Thanks to his improved midrange and post-up game, this season only 32.7% of his shots have come from beyond the arc. His improvement is evident in every aspect of his game. Against Saint Mary's on Jan. 22, Wiltjer switched out to block a corner jumper by guard Emmett Naar, then raced ahead on the wing for a pass from Karnowski, who had picked up the loose ball. Wiltjer went behind his back to evade a defender going for the steal and glided in for a layup. A year ago he might not have had the quick jumping ability to make the block, or the speed to get out on the break, or the confidence to make the behind-the-back move.

The Zags are hoping for more of the same from Wiltjer as they chase that first Final Four, but one of their strengths is that they don't need huge numbers from any one player. With their variety of scoring options it's not surprising that their offensive efficiency rating of 120.9 ranks behind only Wisconsin's and Notre Dame's. "It's not like we have five lottery picks," Few says. "But our guys play unselfishly, with great effort."

Scoring has rarely been a problem for the Zags, who have been among the top 30 teams in offensive efficiency four times in the last seven years, accord-



Helping Gonzaga get to the Final Four after so many near misses and winning a second national championship for himself would be the ultimate trick shot.

ing to kenpom.com, but they haven't been nearly as effective defensively. In each of the last seven seasons, 23 of the 28 teams that reached the Final Four ranked in the top 30 in defensive efficiency. The only time Gonzaga has cracked the top 30 over that span was last season, when the Zags ranked 15th. This year they are ranked 33rd. Though Few is not deeply into analytics, he does stress the importance of efficiency. In scrimmages he often bases winning and losing on points per possession rather than on the overall score. "He wants us to be aware of those kinds of things, to see the whole game," Wiltjer says. "Anything that can make us better prepared to get where we eventually want to go."

That destination, of course, is the Final Four, and thanks to his experience at Kentucky, Wiltjer already knows the way. Helping the Zags get there after so many near misses and winning a second title for himself would be the ultimate trick shot. With his old friends at Kentucky likely standing in the way, the odds are against it, of course. It would be like making a basket from the opposite baseline on the very first try. And what are the chances of that? □

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22 SKIDOO

After a near miss for the Cup championship in the 2014 finale, Logano opened the new season with a masterly drive to victory lane in the Great American Race.



THE KID COMES

Joey Logano survived a gut check over the final laps to win the Daytona 500, a victory that fulfilled the 24-year-old's much-ballyhooed promise, signaled a shake-up among the sport's elite and helped NASCAR rebound from a dark and troubled stretch



OF AGE

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

Photograph by
Jasen Vinlove
USA TODAY Sports

→ **NORMALLY, DRIVING** around in circles at landscape-blurring speeds doesn't make Joey Logano queasy. He's a NASCAR driver, after all. But on Sunday afternoon, as the Daytona 500 reached its final laps, he was feeling the urge to throw up. Actually, Logano would admit later—after easing his bright yellow Ford into Victory Lane, jumping onto its roof, swigging Coke, spraying it on his delirious crew members and Gronk-spiking the bottle onto the checkered-tile floor below—he had been fighting back that urge all day long.

Interestingly, Logano's queasiest moments didn't come when three-time winner Jeff Gordon (racing in his final 500) and two-time champ Jimmie Johnson were taking turns using his right front door as an aerodynamic springboard to the front. Nor did they come during Logano's trips through Turn 4, a veritable wind tunnel on a 70° day. Nor did they come during those tense stretches late in the race, when the prospect of the Big One seemed but a flinch away. No, it wasn't until Lap 197 of a scheduled 200, when a two-car crash on the frontstretch brought the Great American Race to a dead stop just as Logano had retaken the lead, that this typically steel-bellied driver found himself swallowing extra hard to keep his prerace burger down.

The field idled for almost seven minutes, way too much time for Logano to think about way too much: the impending restart, which would require quick reflexes and a push from the fourth-place car of Clint Bowyer to get out front; the parallel mechanical troubles suffered by Ford teammates Brad Keselowski and Ryan Blaney, both of whom were now behind the wall; and the fact that Logano has dreamed of winning this race since he was an eight-year-old go-karter pretending to be Jeff Gordon on the obstacle-strewn lot of his father's Middletown, Conn., garbage company. All of this swirled around in Logano's helmet as he braced for the race's green-white-checker finish, a two-lap sprint into immortality. For a racer in danger of developing a reputation for failing to meet the moment—who flopped as Tony Stewart's replacement after being dubbed Sliced Bread (as in, *the best thing since*) by veteran Randy LaJoie, and who was last seen stewing on pit road at Homestead-Miami last November after his car fell off the jack and crushed his chances of winning the Chase—this seemed like almost too much for Logano to reckon with.

DAYTONA 500

How he came out on top in the end—beating Denny Hamlin off the line, getting a couple of key shoves from Bowyer and parrying a run from 2014 Cup champion Kevin Harvick—Logano still couldn't quite fathom even after the confetti fell. In fact, while waiting to do a live television interview, he would spy a still frame of himself on a nearby video monitor, doing a victory burnout on Daytona's frontstretch underneath the words JOEY LOGANO DAYTONA 500 CHAMPION, and snap a photo to further authenticate his feat. "There's a lot of cool things that come along with it," he would say of his new status. "I'm not even sure what they are yet."

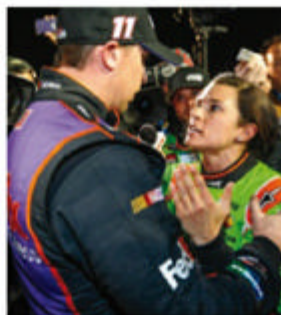
But his career-defining moment would prove even more cathartic for NASCAR, which could not have been in a more desperate rush to get past the Speedweeks from Hell.

NOT UNLIKE the Big One, NASCAR's troubles simmered and stewed before exploding in spectacular fashion. They began all the way back in September, when closed-circuit video of Ray Rice KO'ing his then fiancée Janay Palmer (now his wife) in a casino elevator exploded on the Internet and made domestic violence in sports a hot-button issue.

Two months after the Rice elevator clip, as qualifying began for the penultimate race of the Cup season in Phoenix, 37-year-old Patricia Driscoll complained to Delaware authorities that her former boyfriend, 2004 Cup champion Kurt Busch, had bashed her head against the wall of his motorhome during the fall race in Dover, Del. Joe Custer, the executive vice president of Busch's team, Stewart-Haas, backed Busch and relayed his denial of the allegations. NASCAR chairman Brian France expressed an intent to wait on a completed investigation before considering punishment. The court of public opinion said, That'll never happen because

Travis Kvapil, a truck series driver, was still racing after pleading guilty in 2014 in a North Carolina district court to assault and false imprisonment of his wife. (Under the plea agreement the charges will eventually be dismissed if he completes two years of probation, community service and an anger management class.) It seemed that another domestic violence charge would simply vanish like tire smoke.

And then a public hearing began in Delaware family court for a protection-from-abuse order, a writ that would forbid Busch from contacting Driscoll—a self-



ROUGH PATCH

Logano (22) ran away from the field and a week that included (below, from left) Kyle's wreck, Danica versus Denny, and Kurt's banishment.

employed defense contractor who runs a military nonprofit, the Armed Forces Foundation, with a high profile at NASCAR races. In four court days across three months Busch called Driscoll a "trained assassin" and accused her of killing with rifles and poison, scheduling her assassination missions around the NASCAR schedule. She painted him as an alcoholic with documented problems governing his temper and managing his mood.

Last Friday, four days after awarding Driscoll the no-contact order, commissioner David W. Jones entered a court opinion, writing that he found her version of the encounter "more credible based on her demeanor," as well as on the evidence and testimony of witnesses, and that Busch's version was "unlikely to be true." But the line that hit hardest was this: "Given [Busch's] passion for his racing career and his intemperate and frequently violent reactions to seemingly minor racing setbacks, the Court finds that there exists a likelihood of future acts of domestic violence against [Driscoll]."

Jones's words clearly resonated with

NASCAR. During a hastily convened news conference on Friday night, executive vice president Steve O'Donnell suspended Busch indefinitely. After that decision Busch's manufacturing sponsor, Chevrolet, suspended him indefinitely as well.

While Busch was fighting for his career, his younger brother, Kyle—who weeks earlier bristled at being mistaken for his scandal-plagued sibling—got caught up in a multicar wreck during an Xfinity race at Daytona last Saturday, crashing hoodfirst into an interior concrete wall. The accident shook NASCAR: Busch was extricated from his car by first responders and taken by ambulance to a Halifax Health Medical Center, where he underwent surgery to repair a broken right leg. It was deemed unconscionable that such a thing could happen again at Daytona, the track that spawned 14 years' worth of stepped-up safety measures after the death of Dale Earnhardt. That includes SAFER barriers, the energy-absorbing walls that ring the perimeter of every big league track. On Saturday night a sober O'Donnell





once again took the reins with track president Joie Chitwood, who promised to reinforce all the interior walls at the track with tire packs for Sunday's race before covering every inch of the "hot" parts of the track with SAFER barriers.

The Busch headlines overshadowed confrontations earlier in Speedweeks—including one that saw Logano and Harvick play bumper cars on pit road following the All-Star race and another in which Danica Patrick put hands on Hamlin after the second 500 qualifier on Thursday (a troubling visual for a sport grappling with a domestic violence problem). The off-track controversies also detracted from a genuinely juicy on-track subplot: an intergenerational struggle for supremacy.

DEMOGRAPHICALLY, THE Cup garage essentially breaks down into three groups. You've got your Gen Xers (Gordon, Johnson, Harvick, et al.), who are either pushing 40 or past it and command respect with their myriad accomplishments. Next, you've got your Middle Children (e.g., 2012 Cup champ Keselowski, Kyle Busch, Carl Edwards), who are 30-plus and agitating for respect. On the bottom you have your Millennials (Blaney, Kyle Larson, Austin Dillon), who are in their early or mid-20s and have the potential to dominate the sport well into the next decade.

The 24-year-old Logano, though, is sui generis. While he would seem to belong to the Millennial group, he has been racing in the Cup series for seven years, which technically makes him a Middle Child—albeit one who broke into the bigs at 18.

Perhaps that's why Keselowski prefers to think of his Penske teammate as a child prodigy. "Not to go all Doo-gie Howser on you," he says, "but what

When Logano committed to Team Penske for 2013, at the age of 22, it was as if he had signed a new lease on life. **Finally the former prodigy could be his own man.**



ends up happening is he spends two or three years getting stuffed in the locker, beat up. At the end of those two or three years, he gets it. Problem is, in that school, he's still the youngest one. So he's got to go to a different school."

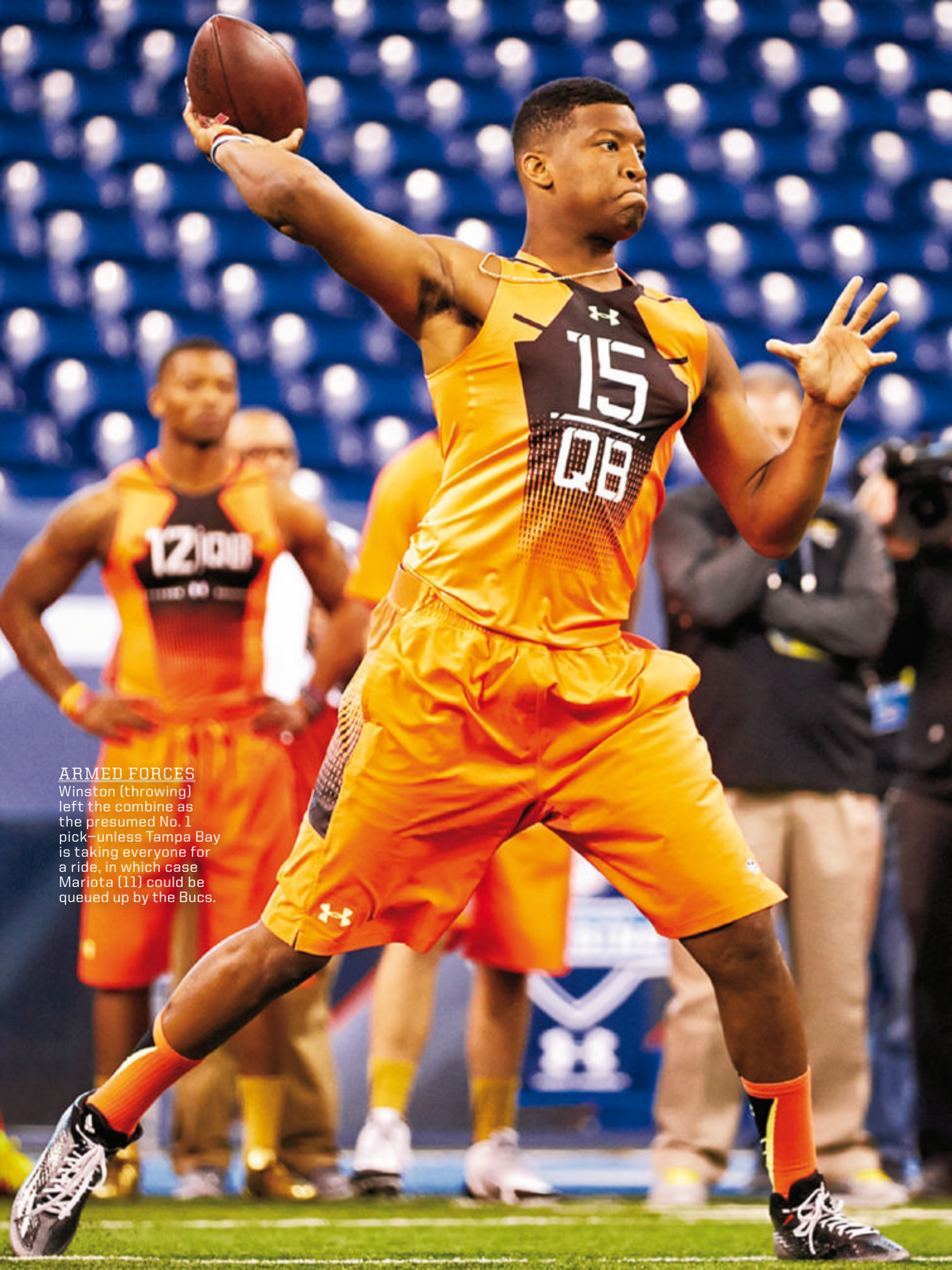
Logano's old school was Joe Gibbs Racing, where he was saddled with the unenviable task of replacing Stewart, who had piloted the number 20 car to Cup titles in 2002 and '05. As for those locker-stuffing moments, Keselowski means Logano's early dustups with Ryan Newman, Stewart and Hamlin—who once ended one of their beefs with a tweet telling Logano to "Hush little child."

It didn't help that Logano was hardly living up to LaJoie's assessment, earning just two wins and 16 top fives over five seasons. The more he voiced his frustrations, the harder it became for his Gibbs teammates to see him as anything but a temperamental punk. "I struggled trying to break that mold, and I didn't quite have the results I needed to break it, either," Logano says. "It was kind of like, How am I supposed to do this?"

The answer: Leave and come to Penske, Keselowski more or less told Logano, while at the same time working on owner Roger Penske, who was about to drop Kurt Busch from the number 22 car. When Logano committed to Team Penske for 2013, at 22, it was as if he had signed a new lease on life. Finally, he could be his own man. "So now instead of being seven," Keselowski continues, "Joey was 11 or 12 with all this high school knowledge. It was perfect timing for a change of venue, with just the right amount of experience to capitalize on it."

In his first year with Penske, Logano won one race. Last year he won five and made it to the final round of the Chase; barring that doomed Homestead pit stop, he might have won the whole thing. Immediately after the race, in which he finished 16th, his thoughts turned to Daytona. During the off-season he virtually lived in the Penske gym, taking his only extended break to marry longtime girlfriend Brittany Baca. He strategized with his teammates, including crew chief Todd Gordon, on shoring up his game on superspeedways—where, save for the Chase race at Talladega, which saw him push Keselowski to victory, Logano has been a poor performer. He spent Speedweeks watching races with spotter Tab Boyd, picking apart his own performances and identifying rivals in the field who might make for good partners. The effort all came together on Sunday, in one final stomach-churning restart.

When he crossed the finish line, Logano could say that he had done the one thing that Stewart hasn't in his 17-year Cup career. Yet more than an hour later, as Logano rode a golf cart under a darkened Florida sky from a news conference in the infield media center to a junket in Victory Lane, he still couldn't believe that he had claimed stock car racing's brass ring. Passing through a gate bearing a poster of Newman (who was, until Sunday, the only Penske driver to conquer this place), Logano couldn't help but ask, "Do you know who won the Daytona 500?" Yes, we do—and NASCAR will be more than happy for him to keep talking about it. □



ARMED FORCES

Winston (throwing) left the combine as the presumed No. 1 pick—unless Tampa Bay is taking everyone for a ride, in which case Mariota (11) could be queued up by the Bucs.



+ NFL

INDY JONES

Every year NFL prospects, coaches, GMs and insiders descend upon Indianapolis, and what unfolds—on the field, at the podium, in the lobbies and the bars—is the foundation of a new season. Here are SI's eight biggest takeaways from the 2015 combine

Photograph by
Todd Rosenberg for Sports Illustrated

■ **THE BUCCANEERS ARE COOL WITH JAMEIS WINSTON . . . MAYBE.** Coach Lovie Smith went right up to the edge of giving the talented but troubled Florida State quarterback his Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, telling reporters, “If a player has been accused of something and he’s been exonerated, I think you go by that. . . . We’re O.K. with where he is.”

EFFECT: Smith’s apparent absolution reinforces the emerging narrative: Winston’s name will be the first called on April 30.

SIDE EFFECT: Or . . . A counternarrative emerges. Beware the Bucs blowing smoke to drive up the trade value of the No. 1 pick.

■ **A QUARTERBACK NOT NAMED WINSTON (OR MARCUS MARIOTA) IMPRESSED TOO.**

In the weeks leading up to the Underwear Olympics, Baylor signal-caller Bryce Petty prepped with QB guru George Whitfield Jr. and new Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh—and it appears to have paid off. Petty got props for his mechanics and the way he threw the long ball in Indianapolis, and, according to

two team execs who visited with him, acted like a franchise QB in interviews.

EFFECT: Petty played in a signal-based spread system at Baylor and called a traditional play for the first time at the Senior Bowl. That, combined with recent struggles by NFL passers raised in spread offenses, make Petty a risky choice. His convincing combine, however, could cement him as the third QB off the board.

■ **THE RAMS HAVE HITCHED THEIR WAGON TO SAM BRADFORD. AGAIN.** St. Louis GM Les Snead seemed to come out strongly last week in support of his star-crossed starter, who’s coming off his second ACL tear in as many years, saying, “I think the guy’s got a chance to be a heck of a starting quarterback.” That followed coach Jeff Fisher’s admission that Bradford had been consulted in the hiring of St. Louis’s new offensive coordinator, Frank Cignetti.

EFFECT: QB-needy teams can assume St. Louis will pass on the position at No. 10 (though the Rams are likely to pounce on a passer in the middle or late rounds).

SIDE EFFECT: Snead will now haggle with

Bradford's agent, Tom Condon, to find a more realistic price tag for a guy who's missed 31 games in five years and is scheduled to count \$16.58 million against the cap.

■ **ERECK FLOWERS IS INTO HEAVY LIFTING.** The Miami tackle led all offensive linemen with 37 repetitions on the bench press last Thursday. (Only five other O-linemen reached even 30.) "I love the weight room," beamed the 6' 6" 324-pounder, who also reiterated that he won't sign with an agent, just a lawyer. He gleaned that idea from former Hurricanes pros: No middle man means more money for him. **EFFECT:** Could a new trend emerge among elite prospects? "I don't see it," says one agent, not surprisingly. **SIDE EFFECT:** Flowers (who was already projected as a first-rounder even before his workout) played left tackle for the Hurricanes, but one AFC scout suggested he's a better fit at guard. Flowers can now debate that himself in negotiations.

■ **KEVIN WHITE PROVED SCOUTS WRONG.** "A lot of people don't think I have top-end speed," the 6' 3", 215-pound West Virginia wideout said before providing evidence to the contrary: a 4.35-second 40-yard dash. **EFFECT:** Now that he's shown his burst, White could be the first receiver taken. "It's no mystery that we're looking for guys that can get down the field," said 49ers GM Trent Baalke, one of several GMs and coaches who cited a need for speed. (San Francisco picks 15th.) Might White, not Alabama's Amari Cooper (4.42), be the guy for the receiver-starved Raiders at No. 4? The Giants,



ISN'T HE JUST DASHING?

White's 40 time, tied for third best among receivers, made some pundits rethink his place in the wideout field.



still in wait-and-see mode on Victor Cruz (torn patellar tendon), are another potential suitor at No. 9. "You can't put all your eggs in his basket," said GM Jerry Reese, confirming that he could draft a complement for Odell Beckham Jr.

SIDE EFFECT: Teams such as Minnesota (No. 11) and Cleveland (12) that have their eye on Cooper or the rising White may have to trade up for their target.

■ **... AND YET WHITE STILL GOT OVERSHADOWED BY THE LAST OF THE BLAZERS.** Receiver-returner J.J. Nelson dashed off four kick-return TDs and averaged a nation-best 38.3 yards per return this year in the final season of UAB football. (The program will be shuttered in 2015.) Last Saturday he clocked the combine's fastest 40 time: 4.28 seconds.

EFFECT: Nelson's result, the fourth fastest for any position since 2005, may alleviate concerns about his being the lightest

combine participant (5' 10", 156 pounds) in more than a decade. The extra attention has personnel folks optimistically comparing him with DeSean Jackson. He'd fit well, naturally, with the Eagles.

■ **THE RUNNING BACKS, THOUGH: NOT SO FAST.** Just four backs finished at or below the 4.5-second barrier in the 40-yard dash. Eleven hit that mark last year. **EFFECT:** Minimal, really, as the top runners made up ground elsewhere. Wisconsin's Melvin Gordon and Nebraska's Ameer Abdullah impressed with their explosion-testing short-shuttle times: 4.07 and 3.95 seconds, respectively. And Colts running back coach Charlie Williams (whose team should be looking at the position) said he was impressed by the group's physical strength, demonstrated in weight drills. **SIDE EFFECT:** There may be fewer home run hitters here, but this class looks to have more three-down guys capable of handling heavy workloads. Contrary to many mock drafts, Vikings GM Rick Spielman thinks a few are even worthy of first-round picks.

■ **A SLEEPER NO. 2 PICK HAS EMERGED.** A source close to Mariota says that the former Oregon QB would relish the chance to learn a traditional pro-style system to prove he can be a complete passer. But the Titans (who pick second), don't appear sold on him as their QB of the future. So if the Bucs take Winston No. 1, Tennessee is likely to go with an elite pass rusher to boost its D instead. And 6' 3", 245-pound Missouri defensive end Shane Ray fits that bill. The Titans are fully aware of what Ray accomplished at Missouri, where he set the Tigers' single-season sack record (14½), and they expressed plenty of interest in him during interviews in Indy. **EFFECT:** Having hyperextended his right big toe in Missouri's bowl-game win over Minnesota, Ray wasn't medically cleared to run at the combine. Now, even more rides on his upcoming pro day, which essentially becomes an important extension of the combine.

—Greg Bishop, Chris Burke, Austin Murphy and Joan Niesen

Sports Illustrated 

Swimsuit 2015

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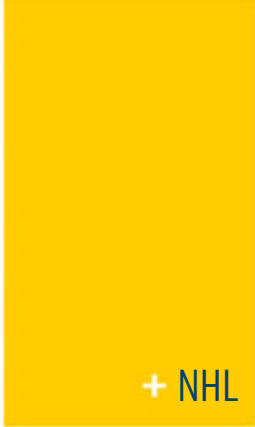
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**MOVING
FORWARD**

Ribeiro's off-ice demons cut short his time with the Coyotes. After he finished rehab last summer, he approached Poile—who told him to stay clean, or else.



+ NHL

Doubling Down on A Second Chance

The Predators have bet big and lost before. (Peter Forsberg, anyone?) But their latest and riskiest gamble—on troubled center Mike Ribeiro—has them positioned for something never seen in Nashville: a long playoff run

BY SARAH KWAK

Photographs by
John Russell
NHLI/Getty Images



LIKE A tight spiral from Aaron Rodgers or a Yuna Kim triple-triple, a pass from Mike Ribeiro is a thing of technical beauty. With pinpoint precision and immaculate timing the Predators' center can thread the puck through the most fleeting of seams and onto the tape of a teammate's stick.

Against the visiting Devils on Feb. 14, with the score 1–1 late in the third period, Ribeiro settled the puck at the right halfboards and waited. With two New Jersey players positioned between him and the slot, he noticed Nashville defenseman Victor Bartley sneaking toward the net on the weak side. In one smooth motion Ribeiro finessed a hard, flat pass through the open lane between the pair of Devils and across the ice to the blade of Bartley's stick. Bartley tapped the puck across the front of the goalmouth to forward Colin Wilson, who buried what would prove to be the game-winning goal. Taking a feed from Ribeiro is easy, his teammates agree; the hard part is being ready for it.

"It's like he has eyes in the back of his neck," rookie winger Filip Forsberg says. "He can see you wherever you are."

Ribeiro, who is tied for eighth in the NHL with 38 assists, has given Nashville's offense a creativity it has long lacked, a big reason why the Predators have the league's best record and are serious contenders to lift the Stanley Cup. Always known for uncompromising defense, Nashville has historically struggled to score. And while the teams in Music City have frequently been good, making the playoffs seven times in eight seasons from 2003–04 through '11–12, they haven't been Cup-worthy. In the Predators' 15 NHL seasons they have ranked in the bottom third of the league in scoring eight times. This season, thanks to Ribeiro, new coach Peter Laviolette's attacking scheme and a cadre of fresh faces, Nashville has a potent attack to pair with the league's second-stingiest defense, which is giving up just 2.27 goals per game. The Predators are scoring 2.92 goals per game, tied for seventh in the NHL, and have the league's second-best goal differential (+39). At the very least Nashville fans can hope that this year's team will be the one to advance beyond the second round of the playoffs for the first time in franchise history.

Signing the 35-year-old Ribeiro—who last June was unceremoniously bought out by the Coyotes just one season into a four-year, \$22 million deal—was a risky move on the part of Nashville GM David Poile. Courteous and thoughtful, the bespectacled Poile has neither the look nor the manner of a gambler, though he did enter this season on a run of bad luck worthy of the Vegas strip. Any bold moves he had

made in previous years seemed to blow up in his face. In February 2007, Nashville—with an uncharacteristically strong offense led by Paul Kariya—was poised for a strong playoff run, and at the trade deadline Poile sent two players and two draft picks (one a first-rounder) to the Flyers for center Peter Forsberg. The deal quickly turned into a bust, with the former MVP hobbled by foot and ankle problems that would soon end his career. The Predators lost in five games to the Sharks in the first round.

In February 2012, Poile traded for Canadiens winger Andrei Kostitsyn. Three weeks later the GM repatriated Alexander Radulov, a talented but embattled winger who left Nashville for Russia and the KHL in '08. "It felt like we were really going for it," Poile says. The Predators beat the Red Wings in the first round, but before Game 2 of their second-round series against Phoenix, Kostitsyn and Radulov were found to have broken curfew. Poile described their actions as "selfish" and "unacceptable," and then-coach Barry Trotz sat the pair for two games. The Coyotes sent Nashville packing in five.

Those moves hang over Poile like a cloud, but he hasn't shown any greater aversion to risk in the last 10 months. Last April, after the Predators failed to make the playoffs for the second straight year, he fired Trotz, the only coach the franchise had ever had. Two months later Poile traded for Penguins triggerman James Neal and then signed Ribeiro in July. And last month Poile scored coveted defenseman Cody Franson in a trade with the Maple Leafs, a move that rounded out the league's strongest blue-line corps.

Despite appearances, Poile insists that he has made no rash decisions. "Poiles are planners," he says, smiling.

POILE NEVER planned on Ribeiro. But to be fair, nobody did. When Arizona GM Don Maloney cut the center, citing "real behavior issues [that] we felt we could not tolerate going forward," he essentially stamped Ribeiro as damaged goods to the rest of the NHL.

Ribeiro was a highly touted playmaker when he broke into the league with Montreal, and he scored 20 goals, with 45 assists, in 2003–04, his third NHL season. At the same time, though, he was also earning a reputation for enjoying the city's nightlife. Ribeiro has never been far from controversy. He fought with Canadiens teammate Saku Koivu at a morning skate in '04. On the eve of the '06–07 season the Canadiens traded Ribeiro, who was coming off a 51-point campaign—his second straight season with more than 50 points—to



the Stars for hobbled defenseman Janne Niinimaa, a move that had more to do with subtraction than addition. In October 2010, Ribeiro; his wife, Tamara; and two friends were arrested for public intoxication at a suburban Dallas restaurant.

Given Ribeiro's history, there was little interest in him when he was forced into free agency last summer. To find a job he had no choice but to make the first move—and to come clean about his past. Through his agent he reached out to Poile in early July. They spoke soon after, on an hourlong Skype call that included Tamara. They didn't talk at all about hockey. Instead, they discussed life.

Though Poile will not divulge details of the conversation, Ribeiro and Tamara opened up in December about Mike's personal struggles—with alcohol, drugs and infidelity—in a 20-minute television interview with a French-language Canadian network, TVA Sports. When Ribeiro was a teenager growing up in Montreal, he said, his life revolved around two things: hockey and partying. His unhealthy lifestyle continued when he reached the NHL. He would drink the night before games and burned through a pack of cigarettes a day at one point; he also admitted to smoking pot and partying too much on the road. "When I was in the high of my career, when I was playing well, I was careless," he told TVA. "You try to get as many girls as possible. I did that for years. . . . I was caught in a double life."

Everything came crashing down after Ribeiro left the Stars and signed as a free agent with Phoenix in July 2013. He and Tamara moved to Arizona that summer, but by October, Tamara (who divorced Ribeiro in 2011 and then remarried him 10 months later) had packed up their three children and left for Dallas. On his own, Ribeiro spiraled out of control. "I would come home and be alone in the house," he said. "I started drinking during the day. I would smoke cigarettes. I would smoke other drugs. I had nothing else to do."

In February, Tamara traveled to Arizona with 13-year-old Mikael, her oldest

MIKE RIBEIRO

2.27

Nashville is allowing the second-fewest goals per game in the league.

2.92

Two years after tying for last in goals, the Predators are tied for seventh in goals per game.

58.4

Nashville ranks fifth in the NHL in shot attempts per 60 minutes, as measured by the stat CorsiFor60.

YELLOW FEVER

The addition of Neal (18, above) and the emergence of Filip Forsberg (9) have added scoring pop and taken pressure off Rinne (in net).



son, for a hockey tournament, and took the boy to see his father. “We walked into his house, and it was a mess,” she told TVA. “He was really skinny. I was afraid that this would be the end of him.” She considered coming back to Phoenix, but Bob Perno, Ribeiro’s longtime agent and adviser, urged her not to.

“I told her that if she went back to Mike, the same thing would start over again,” Perno told TVA. “What he needs is professional help.”

In April, after a dismal season in which Ribeiro had 47 points—his fewest since 2002–03—he asked Tamara if he could see his kids. Tamara said no. “When she said she had had enough . . . that her kids were not going to grow up in my lifestyle . . . that shocked me,” Ribeiro told TVA. He called the league’s director of counseling and then reported to a rehab facility in Arizona, where he spent 45 days getting sober. The Coyotes cut him anyway.

After the conversation with Poile—and without a standing contract offer—Ribeiro and Tamara, who had reunited with Ribeiro after he completed rehab, took the liberty of booking a four-day trip to Nashville. The couple looked at houses, scouted schools and talked to former players. By the end of their trip Ribeiro told Poile they had found a house they liked and asked if they should take it. Poile, who was taken with Ribeiro’s honesty, said, “I suppose we should get a contract together then.”

The deal came with an ultimatum.

“Look,” Poile told Ribeiro, “this is real easy on my part. You could be our No. 1 or No. 2 center, and this would be fabulous for us. This could be great for you and your family, too. You can forget about what happened in Dallas, forget about what happened in Phoenix. It’s a brand-new start.

“But you have to understand that if anything happens—if anything happens—all I have to do is put you on waivers. Nobody’s going to take you. So, it’s over.”

Ribeiro nodded and said, “I understand.”

“Do you want to do this?” Poile asked again.

“Yes.”

Ribeiro, who has asked the NHL to continue testing him for drugs, signed a one-year, \$1.05 million contract on July 15. “I think [Poile] cares about players more than just what they give on the ice,” Ribeiro says. “Reputation follows you. Even if you’re trying to correct it, it sticks with you, and I’ve had one since I was 15, 16. But it always comes down to actions. Hopefully,

my actions this year and in the future can change a little bit of my reputation.”

On the ice Ribeiro has once again become an elite playmaker, helping to push linemate Filip Forsberg, who has 20 goals, to the top of the rookie-of-the-year race. In the first period against San Jose on Feb. 17, Ribeiro forced a turnover in the Sharks’ zone and then slipped a no-look, behind-the-back pass to defenseman Mattias Ekholm. The sleek move, which seemed to catch even Ribeiro’s teammates by surprise—the pass went to Ekholm because forward Craig Smith missed it—helped set up the go-ahead goal in a 5–1 win. “He plays with a lot of deception,” Neal says of Ribeiro.

“I think everybody benefits from Mike a little bit,” Laviolette says. “He’s a player

who constantly thinks about making other players better.” When he surveys the ice, Ribeiro never looks rushed. Shifty, strong and balanced on his blades, he holds on to the puck when other players would be searching for an out. Says his coach, “He has a very high tolerance for panic.”

EVEN IF their revamped look up front garners the most attention, the Predators’ engine is still on their blue line. Nashville’s defensemen, led by the top pairing of Shea Weber and the smooth-skating Roman Josi, the best player nobody knows, lead the league with 153 points.

Laviolette’s system is predicated on aggressive play in all three zones. The Predators forecheck with vigor, looking to create turnovers, and their defensemen are much more involved in the attack than in years past. In the offensive zone Nashville forces pucks toward the net, believing that shot attempts, even those that miss wide or are blocked, are integral to controlling play. The Predators rank fifth in the league in CorsiFor per 60 minutes (58.4), a loose measure of shot attempts per game, and Neal, who has scored 21 goals, trails only Capitals sniper Alex Ovechkin in the category of five-on-five shot attempts per 60 minutes.

If Nashville makes a run this spring, it will still be primarily because of goalie Pekka Rinne, a leading MVP candidate, and the team’s defensemen. But the strategic moves Poile has made—hiring Laviolette, taking a chance on Ribeiro, trading for Franson—will have helped. Poile may insist that he’s not a gambling man, but he certainly knows what it means to go all-in. □

MIAMI M



ASTERPIECE



Jeffrey Loria knows big-ticket collectibles, but the Marlins' owner and notable art dealer outdid himself when he gave Giancarlo Stanton the biggest contract in sports history. Baseball's best power hitter could have gotten paid anywhere—so why did he take the Marlins' money?

BY BEN REITER



Photograph by
Robert Beck
for Sports Illustrated

POWERPAINT PRESENTATION

Stanton worked out eight times a week this off-season, but he took time out from his precamp hitting drills to let SI turn his body into a work of art (inset).

Inset: **Walter Iooss Jr.**
for Sports Illustrated
Bodypainting by **Joanne Gair** for
joannegair.com using body art
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THEY KEPT telling Giancarlo Stanton to roll onto his back, and he kept refusing, though since he couldn't speak he was unable to explain why. So as they tended to him on the steadily darkening dirt by home plate at Milwaukee's Miller Park, and as they loaded his

6' 6", 240-pound body onto a stretcher to cart him off the field, and as they waited in the tunnel for the ambulance that seemed to take forever to arrive, and as the ambulance sped through the night, he remained on his left side. Stanton thought that if he did as they said, he might choke to death on the blood that was flooding his sinuses and gushing down his throat.

Everyone who was there on Sept. 11 remembers the sickening sound that Brewers pitcher Mike Fiers's 88-mph fastball made when it struck Stanton's face, breaking his nose, his cheek and his orbital bone, shattering an incisor and chipping a half-dozen other teeth. They also remember the blood. "It was not just a little bit of blood," says Mike Redmond, the Marlins' manager. "It was a lot of blood."

Stanton's memory of those first few minutes is choppy. Fiers swings his left arm. Stanton sees the ball, but not until it is two-thirds of the way to the plate, far too late. He is on the ground, searching his gums for his teeth with his tongue and finding little pieces of them. He is in the ambulance, desperate to fall asleep



to escape the pain, obeying the paramedics' instructions that he must not.

By the time he reached the hospital, Jeffrey Loria, the Marlins' owner, had already done what he could to ensure that his prized player would receive nothing but the best care. Says Loria, "Three seconds after I saw it on television and was able to pull myself together, I called the commissioner"—the Milwaukee-based Bud Selig—"and said, 'We need to get a plastic surgeon. This good-looking kid is not going to end up having a mistake made in an emergency room treatment.'"

The ER is where Stanton's memory returns in full. The doctor uses her finger to remove the six or seven shards of his teeth that were embedded in his lip, and then, from inside his mouth, pokes her finger through the hole that Fiers's pitch had ripped open in Stanton's cheek—"like a fish," Stanton says. His ears ring; his head pounds. The next day he flies home to Miami on a private jet arranged by Loria—at low altitude, as a normal flight path would have been too dangerous given the blood in his sinuses.

You might think that such a turn of events would have represented a traumatic, or at least an enduringly difficult, experience for Stanton, not least because it abruptly ended a season in which he, at age 24, slugged 37 homers, drove in 105 runs and would likely have won the National League's MVP award. (He ended up finishing second.) But he insists that he considers himself lucky. If Fiers's wayward pitch had hit him an inch lower, it would probably have broken his jaw. If it had hit him an inch higher, he might have been blinded. "I'm used to squaring balls up, so I squared it up as good as I could on that one—with my face," he says.

As for an off-season during which he had to undergo laser treatments for his scar, which is now imperceptible, and six dental procedures that have left him with a bite that still feels misaligned? "I'm not happy that I have to go through all this crap," he says. "But what can you do? Are you going to cry about it all day or just handle what you need to?"

For Giancarlo Stanton, receiving a fastball with his face proved a relatively fleeting, if very painful, annoyance. What happened two months later, when he signed over the next 13 years of his life to the Marlins—a franchise that has not made the playoffs in 12 seasons and is considered in many quarters to be baseball's most cynically run—and guaranteed himself more money, \$325 million, than any other American athlete has earned on a single contract? That was hard.

HE KNOWS no one understands it. Someone wants to give you \$325 million? Three. Hundred. Twenty. Five. *Million?* To play baseball? When you grew up the son of postal workers? And there's a chance—even a chance—that you'll turn them down?

"There was no asking anyone for advice," Stanton says. "Because if you ask anyone, as soon as you tell them the dollars, they're like, 'What's the problem? Hell yeah, why don't you do it?'"

Stanton and his agent, Joel Wolfe, met with the Marlins' brass in Bungalow 10A of the Beverly Hills Hotel on Nov. 6 in Stanton's native L.A. Early in the meeting, club president David Samson—who was representing the team along with Loria, Redmond, president of baseball operations Mike Hill and GM Dan Jennings—slid a piece of paper over to Stanton printed with the outline of contractual terms that were unprecedented in both length and value.

"I think they were thinking I was going to be like, 'Oh, well, sign me up!'" Stanton says. He wasn't.

"I put the paper down, and I was like, 'I'll tell you right now that numbers don't mean anything,'" Stanton recalls. "If you think you're just going to pay me a bunch of money, and I'm going to go live my lavish lifestyle, come to the park and get my ass kicked every day, and go back to my lavish lifestyle, you got another thing coming.' I said that straight to their faces. I was angered."

In his first five seasons, through age 24, Stanton hit more home runs, 154, than all but nine other players at that age. Six of them are Hall of Famers. The other three are Alex Rodriguez, Ken Griffey Jr. and Albert Pujols. If Stanton was in it for the money alone, he might have easily settled in as a one-dimensional slugger and earned loads

BEAN THERE, DONE THAT

The pitch that smashed Stanton's face in September (right) did serious damage (below), but his injuries are no longer visible—and he's not dwelling on them.



of it. But he was driven by something else: a desire to wring everything he could out of his gifted body. So he has pushed himself to become an all-around force, an increasingly accomplished contact hitter (he finished last season batting .288, after flirting with .300 for much of the summer), an improving rightfielder and a solid base runner, too, as he swiped a career-high 13 bags on 14 attempts last year. "The slider tends to be the thing that gets him out, but he's beginning to recognize that more," says Stan Meek, the Marlins' longtime scouting director. "What Stanton has done is really work hard at the



weaker part of his game. Even as a young kid, when he was playing in low A ball, they were in awe of his raw power, and it actually seemed like it was a little bit embarrassing to him. I think what he wanted to do more than anything was not just be known as a big, strong guy who can hit a ball a mile, but to become a complete baseball player.”

Stanton arrived in the majors in 2010, and his development led the Marlins, who had never before viewed anyone as untouchable (they once dealt away Miguel Cabrera, after all), to insist to disbelieving suitors that they would never trade him. By last year, says Samson, “We had sort of had an epiphany that this was the time to approach Giancarlo and discuss with him the possibility of being the man—and being the man forever.”

The thing was, heading into this off-season Stanton had made clear that it would take more than money to make him the Marlins’ man. He had already earned more than \$7.4 million, and would likely have commanded nearly \$40 million over his final two years of arbitration. After the 2016 season he could have become a free agent and gone to play for whoever he wanted—perhaps even his hometown Dodgers. What the Marlins had to do was to persuade a player who had, for a decade,

An inch higher, he might have been blinded. “I’m used to squaring balls up,” says Stanton, “so I squared it up as good as I could—with my face.”

taken complete control of his own life to surrender his destiny to them.

Compounding the issue was that Stanton’s relationship with his front office had been periodically fraught. In late August, 2½ weeks before he was hit by Fiers’s pitch, Stanton was asked if the Marlins’ modest success in 2014 (they had climbed to .500, just three games out of a wild-card spot) had done anything to erase the losing and the perceived broken promises he had so far experienced in Miami. “Five months,” Stanton said ominously, “doesn’t change five years.”

Three months later Stanton was being introduced at a press conference as a Marlin for life. Something had changed, and it was more than his bank account and the contours of the left side of his face.

A VISITING NEW YORKER who has been invited to visit Stanton this off-season in Los Angeles might discover via Google Maps that Stanton’s house is located just seven-tenths of a mile from the visitor’s hotel on the Sunset Strip. He might decide to walk. It will quickly prove a miscalculation.

As it turns out, the route runs entirely up a very steep hill. There



are no sidewalks, and there are no streetlights, and on this evening there are plenty of sports cars negotiating the dark and winding road's blind curves at breakneck speeds. When the New Yorker dives into roadside bushes to avoid those, he will realize he is not alone. He will hear a rustling next to him—not of leaves, but of full branches, as might be produced by a mid-sized predatory mammal.

When the New Yorker, perspiring and jittery, finally reaches his destination, he will encounter a high gate with a buzzer next to it. The gate will slowly swing open, and there, standing by the front door in gym shorts and a sweat-stained T-shirt, will be Stanton, his mass backlit by the house's lights. "You *walked*?" he will say, incredulously. He is an Angeleno; he knows better.

The house is modern, stone and metal, with enormous artworks covering the walls and expansive views of Los Angeles, all the way to the Pacific, through its many windows and from its many balconies. It has a screening room, a hot tub and a putting green. It is precisely the type of place you would expect baseball's highest-paid player to live, except for a few things. One is that Stanton does not own it—nor any property, for that matter—and instead rents it on a month-to-month basis. Another is that he has housemates, A.J. Ramos (a Marlins reliever) and Ricky Nolasco (a former Marlins starter and current member of the Twins), who are among his best friends. A third is that the housemates clean the house, which appears spotless, themselves. Before they had friends over for a New Year's Eve party, baseball's highest-paid player spent an hour and a half washing the silver travertine floors. "His mopping game? Terrible," says Nolasco. "It's not like his baseball game."

It is tempting to look at Stanton's powerful yet lithe physique and imagine that it carried him smoothly from the San Fernando Valley to this life: spend-

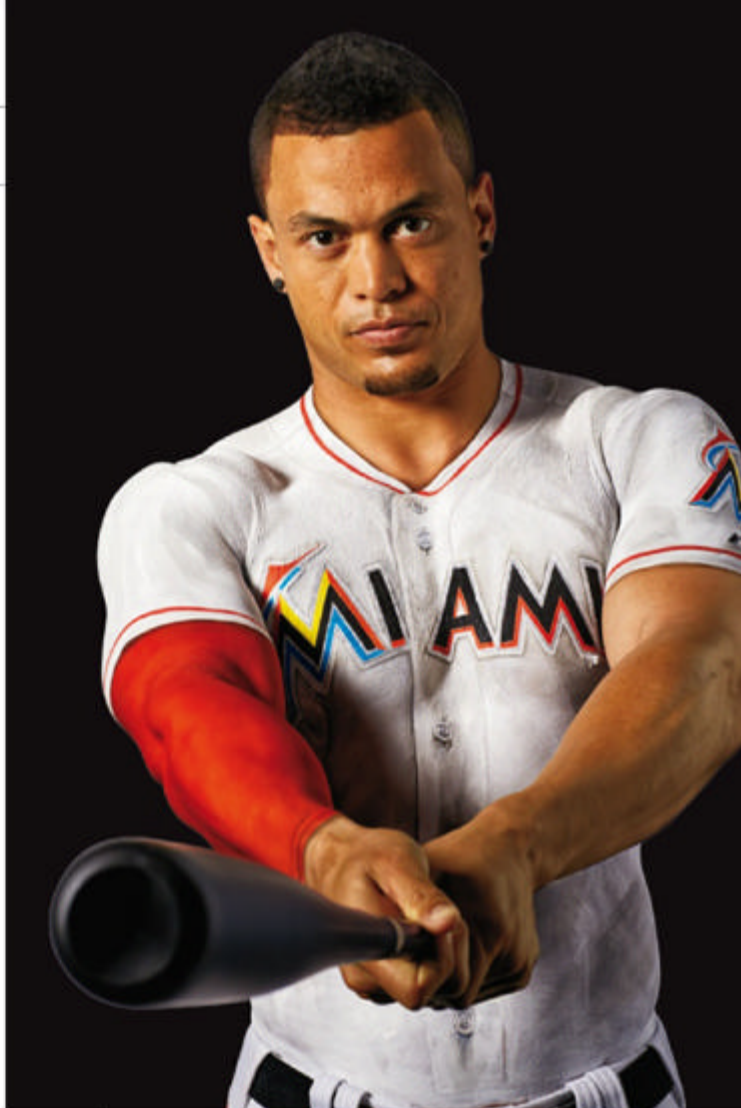
"Why would you give me so much money and not try to win?" Stanton asks.

"What on earth is the point of that? They have to be serious about winning.

There's no other logical explanation."

ing the off-season in a fancy house on a hill with his buddies, a Maserati in the driveway, after a three-week tour of Europe. (This October, as he was still recovering from his injuries, Stanton traveled with Nolasco and Ramos to Spain, Romania, the Netherlands, France and Turkey.) He has always been big and strong. "As a real young kid, he was always built kind of square," says his father, Mike. Until 2012, Stanton went by his father's name—one of his middle names is Michael—though some members of his family called him Cruz, his other middle name. The full name reflects his mix of heritages; his father is of Irish descent and his mother is part black and part Puerto Rican.

The past 10 years have amounted to a graduated process in which Stanton relentlessly focused on maximizing his body's potential, and it has not



always been easy. Eleven years ago Stanton was a freshman at Verdugo Hills High School, struggling with his parents' divorce, staying up all night, barely maintaining a 2.0 grade point average. His physical gifts separated him in football and basketball as well as baseball, but he lacked the structure to be serious about any of them.

As a sophomore, Stanton vowed to himself that something had to change. A friend attended Notre Dame High School in Sherman Oaks, a prestigious private school whose sports teams were good enough to play on TV, and Stanton decided that he wanted to go there too. Sophomore year he raised his grades enough to be accepted.

At Notre Dame, Stanton discovered that being built kind of square wasn't by itself nearly enough to succeed in baseball and that he had developmentally fallen behind many of the top-rated players in California, like Chatsworth's Mike Moustakas and Matt Dominguez and Cypress's Josh Vitters. They were destined to be first-round draft picks; as a junior, Stanton barely hit .200 and batted no higher than sixth or seventh in the lineup. So he set out to change that too—motivated not by the Range



WATCH THE VIDEO / SI.COM

STILL LIFE

→ Joanne Gair's magic takes time. In fact, Giancarlo Stanton could've played a four-game homestand's worth of innings during the hours he spent as a canvas for the world's leading bodypainting artist last week in Miami. Stanton, though, showed the focus and patience of a natural slugger, due in part to the presence on set of 2015 SI Swimsuit model Erin Heatherton. Heatherton had gone under Gair's brushes for last month's Swimsuit issue and was on hand to serve as Stanton's bodypainting sherpa and posing consultant. They bonded over high school basketball (both played), the necessity of depilation and the experience of being underdressed in a roomful of people. Never have 14 hours gone by faster. For behind-the-scenes video and photos, check out SI.com/mlb

Rovers his classmates parked next to his 1999 Corolla ("They didn't work for that, so I didn't have envy") but by a desire to show that he ought to be on prospect magazine covers, right next to Moustakas and Dominguez and Vitters.

Nearly every day early that summer, he worked in the batting cage with a local hitting instructor named Phil Van Horn. At first he hardly made any contact, so quickly did he yank his bat's head through the zone. Then he started making contact, but he couldn't hit anything fair. Then he started hitting balls fair, but only if they were fastballs. Then he started hitting most everything, and hitting it far.

Nobody in California emerges from nowhere like that, so most pro scouts couldn't bring themselves to believe what they were seeing. One did: Tim McDonnell, who was in his first year on the Marlins' staff. "I saw this big fella hitting balls as far as Jose Canseco once did," McDonnell recalls.

The Marlins attended every one of Stanton's games when he was a senior. Their scouts tried to maintain a low profile to conceal their interest from other clubs, although it often was not necessary. "We're hiding at every game, but a lot of times we're the only guys there," says McDonnell.

McDonnell's reports helped persuade Meek and the rest of the front office to pick the relative unknown with the big stick in the second round of the 2007 draft. Seventy-five players had gone ahead of him, and the Marlins had taken Dominguez 12th overall. "I went out to Los Angeles to see the two young men we had drafted," recalls Loria. "I walked on the field, and I saw this sculptured, athletic, wonderful-looking young man. I said, If the physical presence is anything, we have a winner here."

It soon became clear that they did. Stanton crushed 39 home runs as an 18-year-old in A ball in 2008. Two years later, at 20, he hit 22 in 100 games as a rookie Marlin. Four years after that—just eight summers after he had batted .200 as a high school junior—he was headed for the NL MVP award, at least until his unfortunate meeting with Mike Fiers's fastball. He had turned himself into a franchise player, perhaps even a once-in-a-generation talent. But as the Marlins discovered in that hotel room in Beverly Hills in November, a once-in-a-generation contract was only part of what it would take to make him theirs long-term.

AFTER STANTON looked at the contract offer that the Marlins hoped would blow him away, he expressed the frustrations that had accumulated during his five years in Miami: the talented teammates that had been traded; the false promise of 2012, when the front office opened the new Marlins Park with a payroll in excess of \$100 million, only to hack it by more than half the following season. "You guys can do this for 20, 30 years," Stanton told them. "I have only a relatively tiny gap of being at my best, in my prime. And I want to make a difference during that time."

The Marlins, for their part, admitted their errors. They said they realized that their attempt at instant contention in '12, behind the free-agent signings of Heath Bell, Mark Buehrle and Jose Reyes, had been ill-conceived, but that since then they had been assiduously constructing a foundation for sustained success—with Stanton as the cornerstone. "I know that people haven't always agreed with the moves I've made as an owner," says Loria. "But I've been very consistent in what I set out to do, since 2012 and '13, which is hit the reset button and create a long-term system around which we could build a long-term winner." Of Stanton's



GIANCARLO STANTON

past complaints about his tactics, most notably in the wake of the 2012 trade that sent Reyes, Buehrle and other players to the Blue Jays, Loria says, “He did that because he was a little bit younger, had made some friends. That story was old history now.”

Stanton, though he was gradually moving toward accepting the deal, still had his doubts. He hoped to sleep through the five hours of MRIs he had to undergo at the University of Miami hospital as part of his presigning physical, but he found himself lying awake in the machine’s clicking tube. *Did I miss anything?* he wondered. *Is this the right decision?*

When he ultimately signed, on Nov. 19, he did so for three central reasons. One was that he genuinely loves his adopted hometown, which reminds him of the European cities he explores every winter. “I could go anywhere,” he says, “but if we win here, I’d rather be here over any place, any other city.”

The second was that he looks at the young players that the Marlins have assembled around him, and he believes in them: in Jose Fernandez, the 22-year-old ace who will return from Tommy John surgery at midseason; in his fellow outfielders Marcell Ozuna, 24, and Christian Yelich, 23; in Adeiny Hechavarria, the 25-year-old shortstop. “Never are we going to be the biggest market, have the highest payroll, none of that,” Stanton says. “And the players that we have, they’re still not the biggest names, most people aren’t going to know who they are. But in terms of pure talent, they’re there.” Stanton agreed to backload his contract—he will make less than \$15 million in each of its first three years, and over \$25 million in each of the remaining ones—to allow the Marlins to sign some of his contemporaries to their own long-term deals.

The third reason was that he believed Loria’s days of rebooting his franchise were over, and the best proof was Stanton’s own \$325 million offer. “Why would you give me so much money and not try to win?” Stanton asks. “What on earth is the point of that? They have to be serious about winning going forward. There’s no other logical explanation.”

Even so, Stanton demanded insurance, in the form of an opt-out clause that allows him to escape the contract after the 2020 season, when the team will have paid him \$107 million and he will only be 30. “We did not want an opt out,” says Samson. “We wanted him for the full 13 years,

and we are viewing this as a 13-year commitment. He assured us that it had nothing to do with money, or trying after six years to get more of it. We realized he’s not using the opt out as a sword, he’s using it as a shield.”

“That was make or break for me,” Stanton explains. “Because of how things have gone the previous five years. I just wasn’t ready to let that happen for 13 more. I do have to trust that they’re going to do what we plan to do over the next six years. But if they’re not going to, then. . . .”

For the Marlins, who departed from team policy by acceding to Stanton’s demand for a no-trade clause, there is no fail-safe. If Stanton suffers a catastrophic injury, or if his production inexplicably wanes, then they will be on the hook for one of sports’s greatest contractual missteps.

“I would say that me, Mike Hill and Dan Jennings have obviously put our careers and jobs on the line,” says Samson. “Our view is that the risk is

37

Stanton’s home run total in 2014, which led the NL; only two other players reached 30.

154

Home runs Stanton hit through age 24, more than all but nine other players at that age.

24

Times Stanton was intentionally walked in 2014, twice as many as any other National Leaguer.



ART OF THE DEAL

Stanton has been critical of Loria (far left) in the past; the opt-out clause in his new deal is his insurance policy against future Marlins tear-downs.



de minimis. Because the quality of player and person he is leads to our belief that he will continue to get better, and that we haven’t even seen him at his best.”

“There are no considerations for another reset,” says the 74-year-old Loria. “None. I haven’t even thought about it.”

Shortly after signing Stanton, the Marlins set about implementing their new strategy, which involves surrounding him and the other members of their young core with established veterans on shorter deals. They included starters Mat Latos and Dan Haren (who will become free agents after this year), third baseman Martin Prado, and first baseman Michael Morse and second baseman Dee



Mostly, though, he endeavored to make this off-season as normal as possible. Normal, for Stanton, meant working out eight times a week with the husband-and-wife training team of Tarrik and Kanika Brock at locations around L.A., from the Santa Monica dunes to a private gym in West Hollywood, where he lifts next to actors Kevin Connolly and Dolph Lundgren and maxes out the available dumbbells, benching 110 pounds in each hand. (Connolly and Lundgren do not.)

One day in January, Stanton, Nolasco and Ramos drove out to Drake Stadium, home of the UCLA track team. While the Bruins' runners circled round and round, Stanton strapped a 60-pound weight vest onto his bare shoulders and, following the Brocks' instructions, began to sprint up and down the steps of the stadium's stands. There were 15 columns of 80 steps each, and Stanton—with Ramos right behind him, and Nolasco, after a while, some distance back—made his way all the way to the stands' far end and then returned, for a total of 2,400 steps without a break. "Most baseball players, let's face it, they go 90 feet," said Kanika, an experienced track athlete and trainer. "They're not going to train hard like this."

When he was finished—it was a warmup—Stanton was drenched with sweat and his diaphragm vibrated.

He could not speak for nearly five minutes. "You gotta go until you're completely fatigued, so you know what breaks first, what gets weak first," he said finally. "I always keep an eye on where I was when I felt like I needed to stop, and had to force myself to push through. For me, it's always early, maybe a quarter of the way. How am I going to do three times more than what I just did? But then you just find another gear."

That his unique combination of gifts and drive brought with it an unprecedented contract—and a new identity as the game's highest-paid player—is, to Stanton, almost coincidental. "What everybody's doing is asking, if I go take a two-hour nap, how much money am I making during that nap?" he says. (The answer: something like \$5,700.) "But what can I do? It's not like I held a gun to their head and said, 'Give me this money.' If the person asking the question was offered something like that, what would they do?" Stanton plans to buy new homes for his father and his mother, and to become charitably active in both Los Angeles and Miami, but so far he has made no major purchases for himself. "Some food, I guess? I don't know."

Sometimes Stanton envisions where he will be 13 years from now, when the contract will expire, if all goes well. "I'll be 37, 38," he says. "That's over half the years I've already lived from now. I'll be completely different at that point. Maturity, perspectives. Family, possibly, you never know what's going to happen. Just have to see how it's going to work—how I'm going to make it work."

The first spring training of the rest of his life was looming, and it would include the first live pitch he's seen since Mike Fiers's. Of how he will react to that, Stanton says, "I'm not going to fully know until I'm in the game. But it's all about the thought process. The more I'm going to let it bother me, the less success I'm going to have. Which one do you want—are you going to be scared, or are you going to be successful?"

There were still more steps to climb.

Gordon. Such players, while talented, are always replaceable down the road. A player like Stanton is not. "You're fortunate enough to have a great player, what's the point of not keeping him?" asks Loria. "If he's not playing baseball for us, I might as well be doing something else, and I don't want to be doing something else."

Stanton's emotions upon signing the deal surprised him. "I thought it'd be different," he says. "Kind of like, a lot of weight lifted off of my shoulders, as I don't have to worry about finances for the rest of my life, or my family's. But it wasn't like that. It was more—there's things I need to get done."

WHEN HE wasn't in the dentist's chair, or signing a contract that will make him part of the wealthiest .01% in the United States, Stanton did manage to have some fun this winter. There was his tour of Europe, where the locals all thought he was a visiting Brazilian soccer player. There were plenty of late nights with Nolasco and Ramos in Hollywood. (Stanton is single.) In late January he served as a judge, along with demicelebrities such as Lisa Vanderpump and Emilio Estefan, at the Miss Universe pageant. "What's the biggest change you'd like to see for young women in the next generation?" he asked Miss Netherlands.



**WHAT
ME WORRY?**

As president and GM, the neophyte entrepreneur wore many thermal hats, but he worked hardest on finding sponsors and filling seats.

WE BOUGHT A TEAM!

THE AUTHOR, A LONGTIME SI WRITER, LOOKED AT THE REVIVED AMERICAN BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION AND THOUGHT, FATEFULLY, *EVEN I COULD BE AN OWNER*. THE REST IS HISTORY (WITH A MOOSE MASCOT): THE CRAZY, JOYFUL, MOURNFUL TALE OF THE VERMONT FROST HEAVES

BY ALEXANDER WOLFF

Illustration by John Cuneo



THE NOISE still rang in my ears. It had come with each assault on the basket, each steal, each three-pointer: screams, cheers and the clattering of cowbells from people who had turned the vacuum-packed Barre Municipal Auditorium (aka the Aud) into a multiple fire-code violation. Not 16 months earlier, in December 2005, some partners and I had announced to a skeptical state that we had created a pro basketball team, the Vermont Frost Heaves. And now we had won the American Basketball Association championship, sweeping past the Texas Tycoons 143–95 for Vermont’s first national title in any professional team sport. As J.J. Cioffi, the sports anchor for the Burlington CBS affiliate, put it in his postgame stand-up that night, “From no one to No. 1 in just one year!”

We had led the ABA in scoring defense and attendance as percentage of capacity. *Pro Basketball News* would name us the top team in the minor leagues, which included the storied Continental Basketball Association and the NBA’s well-funded D-League. After a parade through downtown Barre to the everyone-invited potluck in the basement of the Aud, our mascot would cavort in the halls of the statehouse, and Vermont’s own Patrick Leahy would read a congratulatory resolution on the floor of the U.S. Senate.

“Just a few months ago we were asking you guys for your Social Security numbers,” I would tell the players at a champagne brunch the next morning, “and here we are, asking for your ring sizes. You should all be very, very proud.”

We had made a mockery of the Green Mountain adage, “You can’t get there from here.” Why, then, did I have a feeling of foreboding in the pit of my stomach?



COUNTLESS PRO basketball dreams began in the suburban Atlanta office of the late NBA scouting director Marty Blake. Mine was no different. Blake prided himself on seeing, or having one of his minions see, every potential NBA prospect on earth. As I sat across his desk in November 2004, Blake turned to an abiding peeve: the newly reconstituted ABA, an outfit so fly-by-night that he and his bird dogs couldn't get a fix on it, even after the league fielded a team in Gwinnett County, not 25 miles away. That franchise was called the Reigning Knights of Georgia, and for the name Blake grudgingly awarded style points. But he liked nothing else about the ABA. Teams popped up around the country, and most soon disappeared. "I can't get rosters," he grumbled. "I can't even get a schedule." As Blake saw it, the league permitted any bozo to start a team. "Apparently," he said, "it costs only \$10,000 to get a franchise."

"For that," I blurted out fatefully, "I could start a team."

And write about it, I thought. Several years earlier my wife, Vanessa, and I had moved from New York City to an old farmstead in the Champlain Valley of Vermont with our infant son, Frank. Our adoptive state had 620,000 residents, a population large enough to support a team. There were only a few major media outlets to attract, and Vermonters fetishize a sense of community and apartness. I imagined a team scaled for the state and, with SI.com's expanding appetite for content, the SPORTS ILLUSTRATED assignment of a lifetime.

During the mid-2000s there was a widely held belief among New Englanders that pro basketball was broken. They'd tell you they didn't like the soulless arenas, the unaffordable tickets or the remote players. In Vermont we could redress each of those things, or so I thought. We could bring life back to downtowns, offering fans a chance to watch professional-caliber athletes in classic buildings with a *Hoosiers* feel. We could get a family of four in the door for \$30, thanks to the ABA's business model, which capped payrolls at \$120,000 per team. And our players could be out in the community, spreading goodwill.

Like any minor league team, we would need a catchy nickname. I had one. During the winter, serial freezes, thaws and refreezes in the roadbeds of Vermont's highways cause upthrusts called frost heaves. The frost heave captured what we hoped to be: seasonal, quirky and, for our opponents, an irritating obstacle. The tagline wrote itself: *We're gonna be the bump in their road*. In February and March, as Day-Glo-orange FROST HEAVES AHEAD signs bloomed along roadsides, we'd circumvent Vermont's ban on billboards.

"They've captured the renegade and unpredictable spirit of the old ABA," I wrote to my editors about the new ABA. "There's a gimmicky rule, in line with the original ABA's three-point shot, giving teams three or four points for a field goal scored after an opponent's turnover in the backcourt."

Early in 2005 the New York City office signed off. SI creative director Chris Hercik began sketching what would become our "dynamic roadbed" logo. And I phoned Indianapolis, where a



MOOSE MEN

Players such as (from near right) Bryant, Levett and Konare were as beloved by fans as Bump.

former ad man named Joe Newman ran the new ABA out of his basement.

Yes, Newman told me, the rights to a "market reservation" in Vermont were available. He would charge me only \$5,000. "There are no dues and assessments," he added. "Actually the league shares its revenues with the teams, not vice

versa." (Never mind that now, nine years on, I'm still waiting on the first penny from the league office.) My plan was to create an entirely different kind of pro sports team. We'd sell local food at our concession stands. We'd be the first "climate cool" team, traveling to games on a biodiesel bus and offsetting our carbon emissions with renewable-energy credits. As the state's manufacturing eroded, we'd model the digital future, letting fans with laptops or smartphones vote on team matters. As sprawl and big-box stores threatened to leech the life from Vermont's downtowns, we'd shore them up by playing in them.

Through all the giddiness, I probably should have lingered longer on why a league with a reputation for unreliability would name a division after Marvin Barnes, the old ABA star notorious for showing up late. And faintly I could hear the murmur of my inner Groucho, wondering if it was a good idea to join a league that would have me as a member.

IN THEORY the ABA's cut-rate market reservation fees were ingenious: By making the barrier to entry low, the league attracted tight regional clusters of teams, all within driving distance of one another, which kept travel costs down. But the owner who had gotten his franchise for five figures or less would have to pay the players and the refs and rent the gym and the bus. By Christmas 2004, game cancellations and team bankruptcies had turned several of the ABA's divisions into husks.

Fortunately there seemed to be a fairly reliable group of owners in our corner of the league, which included



IF WE COULDN'T DECIDE ON ONE ARENA, WE'D PLAY IN BOTH. IT WAS A FORETASTE OF MY MANAGEMENT STYLE: INDECISIVENESS.

Newark; Cape Cod, Mass.; Buffalo and Rochester, N.Y.; and Long Island—or, as the team was called, Strong Island. Moreover, there was a team in Montreal, with another in Quebec City set to join the following season and a third in the works for Halifax, Nova Scotia. Our team would sit in the geographic middle, with no opponent more than a day's bus ride away.

At the league meeting in the fall of 2005, Newman said, "We guarantee that every team that begins play in November will complete its 36-game season." These, I would discover, were not words to take to the bank. At the All-Star break in February I did a quick count. The ABA had begun the season with 48 teams. Thirty-two were still playing.

As the Frost Heaves' president and GM, I locked down enough co-owners to forge ahead, cold-calling some prospects and haunting entrepreneurs' forums for others. Several came in at small amounts but brought symbolic value. Tom Brennan, freshly retired as the University of Vermont's basketball coach, was the most popular figure in the state. Jerry Greenfield of Ben & Jerry's also agreed and sealed the deal with a thermal tote of pint cartons.

Local investors helped spread word in Vermont's business community. We sold naming rights for the extra point after a backcourt turnover, aka the 3-D Rule, to a Burlington nightclub. We also exploited another ABA innovation, the 13th-Man Rule, which allowed each team to suit up one person from the community at each home game. (Strong Island sent out Ed [Cookie] Jarvis, a 6' 6", 419-pound competitive eating champion.) Our 13th-Man sponsorship was bought by Northfield Savings Bank.

Next I weighed where we would play. Chittenden County in the north was home to Burlington, to the state's most influential media and to 25% of its population, but during the winter, University of Vermont hockey and men's and women's

basketball cast a long shadow there. Central Vermont, on the other hand, was another world. Less than an hour down Interstate 89 from Burlington lay Montpelier (pop. 7,700), the only state capital without a McDonald's, and Barre (pop. 9,200), an old granite-quarrying town down at the heels because of cheap foreign competition. But if central Vermont tended to be poorer and more sparsely populated than the north, its towns leaned more toward hoops than hockey. They sorely needed a cause to call their own. And Barre had something that, paired with a building in Burlington, made for a thematic whole.

Vermont had two basketball temples. Each accommodated 1,200 to 1,800 people and had an intimacy that would make for a home court advantage if we could only fill it with fans.

Barre had the Aud, a WPA project from the 1930s built with local granite. It was the site of the annual state high school basketball tournament and was once listed by *USA Today* among the nation's 10 "great places to watch high school hoops." Burlington had Memorial Auditorium. Darker and a decade older than the Aud, it had a *Phantom of the Opera* vibe, thanks to a stage

at one end and a balcony ringing the other three sides that could block shots launched from too deep in the corners. These two old buildings and two downtowns needed new life, as Vanessa, who had agreed to serve as assistant GM, instantly recognized. If we couldn't decide on one, we'd play in both. It was a foretaste of what would soon become my management style: indecisiveness.

Yet by playing in two pockets of the state, we would double our exposure and our potential fan and sponsor bases. People unwilling to commit to a full 18-game "I-89" season ticket could justify a nine-game "Exit 7" or "Exit 14" package at about half the price. We would have enough presence in both markets for each daily paper to cover us, and two radio stations wound up broadcasting all our games, something no other ABA team could claim.

By December 2005 it was time to go public with our plans. The Frost Heaves, I wrote in a grandiose manifesto for SI, would be "built for both the 21st century and the state they call home: part reality series, part high-tech demonstration project, part New England town meeting, part local hero."

During the first two days we logged more than 100 merchandise orders from all over the world. Vanessa and I pulled hats and T-shirts from boxes stashed in our dairy barn, then stuffed them into Tyvek mailers in a spare bedroom. By the end of December no family holiday cards had gone out, but we had sold thousands of dollars in gear.

The vision of social responsibility had resonated with people. "I'd like to buy two season tickets," one transplanted Vermonter wrote. "But since I live in Ohio, I'd like to donate them to a local Boys & Girls Club, YMCA, YWCA, etc." That inspired a program called the Jack Frost Seats, through which anyone could underwrite tickets that let kids sit, Nicholson-like, in the front row.



EXPANSION TEAMS in pro sports had long given fans the chance to vote on a nickname or a mascot. I decided to put before our supporters a much more consequential decision, which I couldn't bring myself to make. In April we presented two finalists for our coaching job to a vote of our online community, the Bump in the Road Club.

I made sure I'd be comfortable with either. One coach, Rus Bradburd, had paid his dues as a big-time college assistant, first at UTEP and then at New Mexico State. Bradburd had discovered Tim Hardaway, and more recently he had led the Tralee Tigers to the Irish Super League title. I loved his memoir, *Paddy on the Hardwood*, a tale of self-discovery embedded in an account of that championship season. Bradburd was also a recreational fiddler—just the kind of character who figured to be a fit for Vermont.

The other candidate, Will Voigt, had grown up in Cabot, Vt., in an old farmhouse with a hoop in the barn. At 18 he'd lit out for California's Pomona College, where he stumbled into an internship with the Clippers. That led to stopovers in the video room of the Spurs; at Texas as an aide to Rick Barnes; and in Bergen, Norway, where he now served as coach of the Ulriken Eagles. But what leaped out from his résumé was a season at Metro State, a Division II power in Denver. For a story on the decline of fundamentals, I had once attended a Metro State 6 a.m. practice, which is all footwork and positioning, no balls allowed. Will might have been barely 30, but his pedigree suggested an old basketball soul.

Most of our voters were Vermonters, and Will won the balloting by almost two-to-one. We would supply him with a place to live, a car and a living wage. And I signed off on a bonus of \$20,000 if we beat out that mass of other ABA teams for the title. The prospect seemed too remote to be a deal breaker.

It was Vanessa who came up with our mascot. A regular if usually unwelcome feature along Vermont's roads are wild moose—and, in homage to the frost heave, we decided to call ours Bump. To create Bump, we hired the dean of mascot makers, a Québécois named Jean-Claude Tremblay, who had designed hundreds of such creatures, including Youppi! of the Montreal Expos and Champ of baseball's Class A Vermont Lake Monsters.

Tremblay's Bump was gloriously goofball, with a Day-Glo-orange BUMP road sign on the back of his Frost Heaves jersey and half an ABA basketball sitting yarmulkelike atop his head. At \$3,300, he was a steal. He became the face of the team months before we had a team. He would do duty in Memorial Day parades and at county fairs, sometimes with the Frost Heaves' GM or his assistant in the suit.

But the issue that most consumed us was how to populate our roster. The \$120,000 payroll cap for a five-month season lagged behind the D-League's, the CBA's and most European clubs'. Further, because the D-League was the NBA's own, any



EMAILS POURED IN FROM GUYS EAGER TO SHOW US WHAT THEY HAD: SILKYSLIMM21, HOOPSOUL23, IGETBUCKETS, BIGFELLA52.



prospect with ambitions to play in the Show would choose the Down Low, where scouts could follow his progress. So our task was to highlight what made us distinct. Our small market had already embraced the team. We would supplement salaries with housing and meals. Our coach had a bulging Rolodex of contacts as well as player-development cred; put in a good season with us, and you could

move on to a better-paying gig overseas. The quality of our roster would come down to Will's ability to network, evaluate and jawbone, and to creatively slice up the payroll pie.

No sooner did we announce a date for our first open tryout camp than the emails poured in from guys eager to show us what they had: silkyslimm21, hoopsoul23, igetbuckets, bigfella52, swoosh1223, realmainevent, hoopdream31 and one Marcus Birdsong, who, invoking a former NBA All-Star, assured us that "I take after my uncle Otis." The open tryout was really a way to suss out the handful of locals we were determined to include on the team. Will found most of our other players by working his network. Antonio Burks, a 6' 5" forward from Stephen F. Austin, had played for him in Norway. Antonio was slow the way Larry Bird was slow, aware of the accuracy of his parabolic threes and thus the power of suggestion in his shot fake.

John Bryant, a 6' 7" forward, had played at St. Joseph's as the Hawks won 96 games, including 27 during their undefeated 2003–04 regular season. The two-year captain was a rebounder, screen-setter and a master of enough subtle basketball arts that Temple coach John Chaney once put a player into a game to send a message. The player broke J.B.'s arm, and he handled it with the even temper he would bring to our locker room.

On a tip, Will found, playing in a pickup game at Vermont's



Hudson River. He practiced so hard that one day he collapsed during a workout; we took him to the hospital for tests on his heart. It turned out Melvin had simply played himself to exhaustion.

AT THE league's fall 2006 meeting in Indianapolis, we were treated to one of Newman's Amway-style seminars, this time on the two economic fundamentals of minor league hoops: 1) You'll need about \$400,000 to operate your team for a season, and 2) the more you reduce that figure with trade and barter, the better off you'll be. So we exchanged equity in the team for office space, and we gave arena signage to an appliance store in exchange for the flat screen for Will's video edits. Meanwhile our pledge to feed the players forced us into more dealmaking. While breakfast was included at the MainStay Suites, the players' budget hotel, that left 14 lunches and dinners each week, at least until the season started and the guys could collect per diems on the road. So restaurants and fast-food places got ads, signage and tickets in exchange for feeding 15 ravenous young men.

"It's the ABA" was our refrain when anything obstructed our path. But until that first season began, the phrase had pertained only to things organizational. In our opener, in Quebec City against the Kebekwa, we ran into the legislated chaos of the 3-D Rule. We played a first half of almost perfect basketball, locking down their guards and fronting their bigs into irrelevance. Antonio dropped 17 points in the second quarter, including five majestic threes, to give us a 56-33 halftime lead. But we knew what was coming: Other ABA coaches had shared tales of the 3-D Rule's tidal-force effect. In the locker room Will talked about it: how the Kebekwa would press, get the sellout crowd of 900 into things and make the refs less and less inclined to intervene. Even so, we couldn't stop Quebec City from forcing turnover after turnover. Steal, layup, foul. Three, sometimes four points per trip, all thanks to the 3-D Rule. We were lucky to force overtime before *les Kebs* flattened *les gels se soulevés* (that's Frost Heaves *en français*) 108-100.

Afterward Will called it his worst loss as a head coach. He sat on several timeouts as the lead bled away. "Guys have to figure it out for themselves," he told me. "This is a journey."

Our hotel in Quebec City had an adjoining nightclub called The Ozone. Will told everyone to steer clear of it; we had a game in Montreal against the Matrix the next day. Just to be sure, he worked on his video edit in the lobby, with a clear view of The Ozone's entrance. Unbeknownst to the players, he witnessed two of them "partaking." At a team gathering the next morning, Will asked the two players to identify themselves. Forward Lester Strong raised his hand. The other player, shooting guard Aaron Cook, didn't. Will sat Aaron that day. "I scared the bejesus out of him, but it was the start of the whole process," Will said.

We beat the Matrix 94-83. But the trip's real value lay in what had transpired in Quebec City: that lesson in the 3-D Rule, and the evolution of Aaron, a former captain at Hartford who, as Will would later put it, "ended up being an absolute gem of a kid and a player." Sure that he was only one

LAST WORD

Voigt (opposite page) found Akingbade (50) and other players and drew up the high-scoring O.

Patrick Gym, 6' 8" forward Issa Konare, a former Big South Defensive Player of the Year. He had played for the junior national team of his native Senegal, then made his way to High Point (N.C.) University, where he met his Vermonter wife, Samantha.

Finally, Rus Bradburd graciously hooked Will up with the two best players he knew from Ireland. One, a 6' 5", 220-pound forward named Tyrone Levett, had helped Alabama State land its first NCAA bid, in 2001, by posting up and sinking threes. The other player, Travarus Bennett, was a 6' 7" former Big Ten Co-Defensive Player of the Year who had averaged seven deflections a game at Minnesota. Or as one of his college coaches had put it, "He's not vertical. He's horizontal."

Vermonters compensate for long winters with summertime fairs and festivals. We dispatched our new signees to many of these events, usually with Bump as chaperone. Our team would be almost entirely black, and Vermont is one of the whitest states in the union, but our signees interacted easily with everyone. Markus Austin and Kevin Mickens were city kids from White Plains, N.Y., and Baltimore, respectively, but most of our other players had small-town country backgrounds, and even those who didn't set a tone that locals warmed to.

Meanwhile, Will found a couple of guards. Tyrone Barley had been Bryant's teammate at St. Joe's, the sixth man and defensive specialist on that 2003-04 team. Barley sent a tape that astonished Will. "He's completely shutting down Chris Paul [in the Hawks' 2004 NCAA tournament defeat of Wake Forest]," Will would tell me. "The best ballhandling point guard in the NBA right now, and he could not bring the ball up the floor."

Will also staged a tryout camp in New Jersey where 6' 1" Melvin Creddle caught his eye. Melvin had played only a few seasons of organized ball, at Cisco (Texas) Junior College and then Division II Mount Olive (N.C.) College. But his legend as a streetballer known as Problem Child was about to jump the



misstep from getting cut, Aaron desperately tried to help the team. He asked Will what he could do to improve his ballhandling. Will gave him a handful of exercises, and soon Aaron was up all night in his room, pounding the carpet in two-ball drills with Melvin, who never slept anyway.

For our home opener, in Barre, 1,200 people showed up, including governor Jim Douglas, who threw the jump ball. The Northfield Savings Bank 110% Community All-Star (our 13th Man), Barre mayor Thom Lauzon, went 0 for 2 from the line, but everyone else scored as we beat Quebec City easily. Before the game the circulation director of *The Barre Montpelier Times Argus* asked if the newspaper could hand out cowbells at the entrance. The hundreds of ringing bells had a low, rattling sound that drew people into the action. Fans brought their bells to subsequent games, and soon we were cranking out Blue Oyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper" laced with audio of that *Saturday Night Live* "More Cowbell" routine.

Then, on Dec. 14, 2006, exactly one year after I announced the birth of the team, the twin banes of our opener in Quebec City—the 3-D Rule and Aaron Cook—gloriously combined in Burlington. We were 8–2, hosting the team we then led by a half game in our division, the defending champion Rochester RazorSharks. They had a stacked roster thanks to their owner, a medical entrepreneur and real-estate baron who maxed out the salary cap and steered all sorts of perks his players' way.

We led most of the game, sinking threes when we needed them and playing great defense, led by Travarus Bennett's horizontal exertions. But we were careless with the ball during the fourth quarter, and Rochester—a veteran, well-coached team—stood up seven with 23 seconds to play. Good chunks of the late-arriving crowd were early to depart. Then, without warning, Aaron knocked down a three-pointer. As the RazorSharks tried to inbound, one of them got whistled for tripping, and because the foul was considered a turnover in the backcourt, the 3-D lights around the backboard lit up. Ty Barley found Aaron just beyond the top of the key, where he rose and released a shot that splashed through the net, counting for four and forcing overtime. That's where Ty sank a huge three-pointer of his own, and our defense delivered three straight turnovers to seal a 95–93 win.

On Dec. 30 and 31 we scored narrow victories over Cape Cod in matinees at the Aud. Fans dragged in relatives and friends home for the holidays to see a bunch of black guys coached by a kid from Cabot playing it old school, while a moose gamboled in the stands amid people ringing cowbells. In the second game, sustained by our first sellout crowd, we clawed back 10 points in the final five minutes to win. As they would do at every home game, our guys showed their love in return, inviting youth-league players into the pregame layup line and staying on the floor postgame until the last autograph-seeking kid had left.

It began to seem as if every home game was a Disney episode. At Bump's Birthday Party, the Lake Monsters' Champ and UVM's Rally Cat showed up for a full-court mascot game during an extended halftime. During our first Burlington sellout, against the



NATURALS

In their first two seasons together, the Heaves won ABA titles and the hearts of Vermonters.

Strong Island Sound in January, 110% Community All-Star Matt Johnson, a former star at UVM, came off the bench in the final minutes to toss in our 18th three-pointer of the game.

Off the court we had gotten an unlikely purchase on the *Zeitgeist*. A contributor to *msnbc.com* advised men eager to impress women not to

wear a Frost Heaves sweatsuit to bed. A Montpelier hip-hop label released "Bump the Rap," which was pretty catchy despite the long groan of an actual moose call. For the annual sex survey in the Vermont alt weekly *Seven Days*, Bump got a vote in the question, "If you could have sex with a prominent Vermonter, he or she would be?"

In February the Maryland Nighthawks visited Burlington with their new signee, 7' 9" Sun Ming Ming, the tallest pro player ever. Nearly 1,200 people came to watch the big guy. Sun didn't have a bad touch: He sank three free throws in four tries. But we ruled the opened-up floor during his long stretches on the bench and won 113–104, our 12th victory in 13 games. The sap buckets hadn't yet been hung on the maples, and we were 24–4.

HAVING TURNED all things basketball over to Will, I tried to make a mark elsewhere. I chose the Robert Frost reference in our ads ("Stop By Our Hardwoods on a Snowy Evening"). If Will was up pleading his case after a ref's whistle, our sound man punched up James Brown's "Please, Please, Please." When Bump took the floor, we'd cue up a snippet of Woody Allen's routine about a moose loose at a costume party: "The moose starts to mingle. . . . The moose is doing great. . . . He scored."

But we had one victory for which I could take some credit. In early December, at Strong Island, the Sound went up 19. We made a run to close within four, but they went up by 19 again, at which point Michele Wuestman, their co-owner, asked me, "How does it feel to get your ass kicked?" We used one more



A WEB WRITER ADVISED MEN NOT TO WEAR OUR SWEATSUITS TO BED WITH WOMEN. A HIP-HOP LABEL PUT OUT “BUMP THE RAP.”

run to force overtime and lost only because a short bank shot from Antonio at the buzzer skidded off the rim.

When we returned a month later, I made sure the players knew about Wuestman's comment. Melvin's eyes widened. In a frenzy he led the team out on the floor. In the final two minutes we trailed by a basket, but again Aaron came through. With the 3-D lights on, he curled around a screen, took a sideline inbounds pass and sank a three-pointer worth four that gave us a 96–94 win. By mid-February we were in the top spot in the ABA Power Rankings for the first time, and we would hold the position going into the last week of the regular season.

Our final two games were back-to-back in Montreal and Quebec City. After beating the Royal on Saturday evening, we knew the stakes in Sunday's 1:35 p.m. matinee against the Kebekwa: Lose, and we'd forfeit the No. 1 seed. Win, and all our playoff games would take place in Vermont. The Kebs jumped all over our weary rear ends. Over 50-plus minutes we led just once. Down 14 points with 3:35 to play, we seemed finished. Then Ty Barley bottomed out a couple of three-pointers. Aaron added one of his own. Ty connected yet again. With 12 seconds to play the Kebs still led 97–94, with one of their players lining up a free throw. He missed. Antonio grabbed the rebound. He pitched an outlet to Ty Levett, who found Aaron up the left sideline. With one crisp pump fake Aaron sent his defender sailing past him and forced overtime, with a shot that ripped through the net.

During the three-minute extra period Ty Levett wrestled free for a layup, Ty Barley did the same, and we finished the job. The 40 cowbell-equipped Frost Heaves fans who had made the schlep up for the weekend joined our players in the scrum on the floor. We had wound up our inaugural season with a 30–6 record, best in the league.

This being the ABA, the playoffs would not be fully populated. The Arkansas Aeros withdrew because of, management said in a statement, “inconsistent direction from the league office.” (Newman claimed he had kicked the Aeros out for failing to pay players and staff.) The RazorSharks, who finished just behind us in the division, withdrew too; their owners were plotting to form a new league. Fifty teams had started the season. About half still had a pulse. And there was Newman promising no fewer than 70 teams for next fall.

We sailed through our first playoff game, against Strong Island. Our next we won with more difficulty, over the Bellingham (Wash.) Slam. That set us up against the Wilmington (N.C.) Sea Dawgs in a semifinal. During the second half, Melvin drove into the lane and flew into a dunk that made more than 1,300 fans practically lift the old Aud off its stone moorings. The 113–85 victory ensured that, two days later, we would welcome the

Texas Tycoons for the ABA title game.

The Tycoons were a deep, fast, swaggering bunch who averaged 132 points a game. They sank two three-pointers to seize a 6–2 lead. But from that point on, with our fans ringing their cowbells and holding signs such as DON'T MESS WITH VERMONT, we had our way. Ty Levett led us with 33 points and nine rebounds. More meaningfully, everyone scored, just as in our home opener.

Will was named ABA Coach of the Year. The Vermont town meeting had done right by us: The fans had chosen Will, and he, like a selectman, had chosen the men he would lead. As I told the crowd at the championship potluck, “Is democracy the greatest form of government or what?”

WHEN OUR investors assembled for the annual meeting of Bump in the Road Enterprises LLC, I pledged that we'd do all we could to leverage the artistic success of year one into sponsorship sales for year two. And, after a hard swallow, knowing we still owed Will his \$20,000 bonus, I showed them the source of my developing ulcer: We had nothing in the bank. Nothing.

By screening a season-highlights video, however, we excited enough businesses to collect \$280,000 in sponsorships by the time our second season tipped off. Leading the way was the Vermont State Employees Credit Union, which ponied up \$50,000 of support over two years. Even so, we were far from breaking even.

For season two the scheduling gods delivered a weekend matinee in Burlington early in 2008, and we vowed to make it count. We brought in our archrival, the Manchester (N.H.) Millrats, and announced that any kid 14 or under wearing a basketball jersey would get in for half price. We correctly figured that each would have to bring along a mom or dad



who'd pay full freight, and we drew our biggest Burlington crowd of the season: 1,100. But by halftime two scuffles had broken out on the court, and as we held a decisive lead in the final minute, a Millrat sucker-punched our center, Erik Nelson. Before the benches emptied, the officials declared the game over and us the winner, even though 37 seconds remained.

Meanwhile, we again racked up the best record in the league. Only the dreaded Millrats could beat us. In the playoffs we took out the San Francisco Rumble in the quarterfinals and the Texas Tycoons in the semis, but in the locker room before the title game against the San Diego Wildcats we counted our casualties. Issa Konare lay supine on the floor, his back a mess. Brett Gravitt, our valiant swingman from South Alabama, was on crutches. John Bryant and point guard Dwayne Lee sat in street clothes. And we had long since lost guard Terrance Green to a knee injury.

How, then, did we beat San Diego for our second title? The 87–84 victory was down to many little things: Issa's inspirational first-quarter cameo; the inside presence of Dokun Ak-ingbade, a 6' 9" center from George Washington; and closeout plays by Antonio, Markus Austin and Dwuan Rice, a 5' 11" point guard who had starred at Division II Cal State–Bakersfield. We finished with a better record, 37–4, than the year before, but it had been much more of a struggle. And nothing flattened the bubbles in the champagne like having to find

thousands more in bonus money for players and coaches.

Although we never canceled a home game in those two seasons, we experienced too many close calls. Meanwhile, Rochester had led the founding of the smaller, Northeast-focused Premier Basketball League. So with Quebec City, Manchester and Halifax we joined the PBL, which agreed to waive entry fees, cover our travel costs for the first season and thoroughly vet any new ownership group. Then, in September 2008, the U.S. economy melted down. We had tapped out local sources of investment, to say nothing of what Vanessa and I could shovel into the breach. I was still team president, but before season two I had yielded GM duties. At the end of season three I stepped away from the team entirely to return to the pages of SI.

As Vanessa and I looked back, the adventure had a did-that-really-happen? quality. In branding and pure basketball terms, the Frost Heaves had been a massive success. We had hosted the equivalent of 18 parties a year for 1,000 or more people a pop; we had fed, lodged and paid the entertainment; and we had done it all with two full-time paid staff members and, otherwise, part-

SI.COM

For more on the improbable saga of the Frost Heaves, including photos and video, go to SI.com/longform

Two irresistible flavors

I can't believe they're making a megastar like me do this.

Hey, I know those guys.



timers, contractors, interns and volunteers. But as a business, ours had been a futile effort to get multiple tumblers to fall into place at once. In year three we frantically tried reducing expenses but couldn't cut our way to sustainability in the midst of the Great Recession.

Barre mayor Lauzon and then Frost Heaves GM Mike Healey saw the team through season three. Finally a core group of devoted Bump in the Road Club members banded together to start a fourth season, with the entire operation based in Barre. But they couldn't scare up enough support to sustain the team past January. The Frost Heaves joined the roll call of minor league basketball teams to start but not finish a season.

WITH THAT second title Will had again been named ABA Coach of the Year, and after he led us to the PBL playoffs in season three, he was hired by the D-League's Bakersfield (Calif.) Jam, which he coached for five years before moving on to lead China's Shanxi Dragons. Meanwhile, Bump lives on at Barre's Thunder Road as Speed Bump the Racing Moose, the basketball on his head replaced by a pair of old-time motoring goggles. If you go to the Vintage Teams section at Prepsportswear.com, you can find Vermont Frost Heaves gear. As for the ABA, it's the same old, same old: It lists about 60 teams on its website, but from

our era only the San Francisco Rumble and New Jersey (né Newark) Express remain.

One day four years after the team folded, I was back in central Vermont chaperoning a field trip from my kids' elementary school. After surveying the quarries around Barre, we made a pilgrimage to Hope Cemetery, where the gravestones came from the same quarries that had built the Aud. Many of the names chiseled on them were also on our season-ticket list: Comolli and Allen, Bellavance and Benoit, Cody and Fraser.

And it was then, there, that it became clear. What we had done with the Frost Heaves was all about people, and the forces that made them want to fill up stone-and-brick buildings in winter. Fired not by money but by the American romance of a ball and a basket, young men, virtually all of them black, had come to Vermont to see what they could achieve. Vermonters, virtually all of them white, had turned out to watch them because, I think, they recognized what they and their forebears had dedicated their lives to: hard work in the service of a common goal, with a reward of something more than just cash in their pockets.

Our players had been delighted to discover so many local residents who wanted to acclaim them for what they earnestly wanted to do. Our fans had been equally pleased to see their love required. At first blush those fans and players had little in common. By the end we all realized that, in fact, they had so very much. □

under 200 calories.

I don't like the way people are looking at us.



I better be getting paid overtime for this.



The Lure of 10,000 Lakes

→ BY STEVE RUSHIN



IF YOU DON'T understand why Kevin Garnett would waive his no-trade clause with the Nets to return to Minneapolis (where it was 9° below zero on Sunday) and play out the string for the Timberwolves (who haven't made the playoffs in 11 years), then you've never lived in Minnesota, which is harder to escape than Leavenworth and has a higher rate of recidivism.

Hardly anyone leaves Minnesota, and those who do almost always come back. "[Garnett] doesn't look at moving from Brooklyn to here as change," said Timberwolves coach Flip Saunders, who went to the University of Minnesota out of Cleveland and has returned twice to coach the T-Wolves. "He looks at it as being home."

"This is home for me," former Twins star Torii Hunter, an Arkansas native, said in December, when he signed a free-agent deal for his second go-round with the team. New manager Paul Molitor was raised in St. Paul and finished his Hall of Fame playing career with the Twins, whose current stars Joe Mauer and Glen Perkins grew up in Minnesota and never left.

Kent Hrbek never left. Kevin McHale came back. So did Jack Morris and Dave Winfield. Even Prince never left for long.

Garnett came to Minnesota from South Carolina by way of Chicago at age 19. Kirby Puckett came from Chicago, Alan Page from Canton, Tony Oliva from Cuba, but all grew attached to this peculiar place, where cheese is served *inside* the cheeseburger and people write personal checks for five bucks of gas at SuperAmerica.

Who would ever leave? "Minnesota is a state of public-spirited and polite people, where you can get a good cappuccino and eat Thai food and find any book you want and yet live on a quiet tree-lined street with a backyard and send your kids to public school," according to Garrison Keillor, who left for Copenhagen and New York City but inevitably returned to St. Paul.

"*What's wrong with American cities?* is a question that demographers and economists have debated for years," *The Atlantic* noted last week. "But maybe we should be looking to a luminary exception and asking the opposite question: What's right with Minneapolis?" The magazine reported that

Why would Kevin Garnett return to the T-Wolves? He couldn't help it: No one leaves Minnesota, and if they do, they almost always come back.



If you could choose to play in one pro city, which would it be?

Join the discussion on Twitter by using **#SIPointAfter** and following **@SteveRushin**

Minneapolis has the second-lowest "outflow" of college-educated people among America's largest 25 cities. In other words: People don't leave.

Everyone *thinks* of leaving, but only in February, that stretch of hard time between the U.S. Pond Hockey Championships and the state high school hockey tournament. That's when Minnesotans are torn between all that is right with the state and that which is not, as best expressed in a line by beloved Minnesota band The Hold Steady: "He loved the Golden Gophers, but he hated all the drawn-out winters."

Frontman Craig Finn did the reverse Garnett, leaving Minneapolis for Brooklyn, in body if not in spirit. I also left, but only physically, creating a Bloomington-by-the-Berkshires in New England, content that certain safe words—"Hardware Hank," "Red Owl"—can instantly take me back like Kane's Rosebud.

In Garnett's first stint with the T-Wolves, owner Glen Taylor reluctantly gave him a \$126 million contract, then the most lucrative in sports history. At the time, Taylor was not eager to talk to me about it but eventually relented, sighing, "Well, you're from Minnesota. I can trust you."

He was invoking family ties—every Minnesotan's shared history of hotdish, Pearson's Nut Goodies, Schmidt scenics and something called The Cannon Mess. If that reads like secret code to you, that's precisely the point.

Minnesota isn't for everyone. "When I left there, man, I knew one thing," the former Robert Zimmerman once said. "I had to get out of there and not come back." But he had to change his name to Bob Dylan to remain at-large, a fugitive on the lam from some powerful authority. So did Frances Gumm, who left Grand Rapids, became Judy Garland and is now best known for clicking her heels together, wishing she were home. □



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